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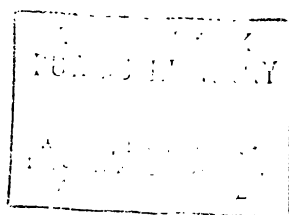
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He took Marvie's hand and held it fast. "Come," he said, almost tenderly, "let me have the pleasure of being your host"—Page 67.

A Midsummer Madness.

A MIDSUMMER ❁ ❁ ❁ ❁ ❁ ❁ MADNESS

A NOVEL

By MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON

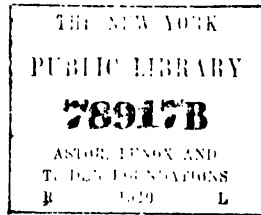


" Give me a nook and a book,
And let the proud world spin round."

A. L. BURT COMPANY, ❁ ❁ ❁ ❁
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A MIDSUMMER MADNESS.

CHAPTER I.

WESTERN LODGE.

FOR a small place, Western Lodge was one of the most attractive abodes that can be imagined. The house was not old enough to lay claim to antiquity, and yet was sufficiently old to have outlived the aggressiveness of the entirely new. The brick of it—that was red—was mellowed by time and weather, and the creepers which old John Mathurin had planted with a liberal hand as soon as the roof was on the house, had now, in the days of his grandson, covered all the wall from the ground up to the dark-tiled gables, where, indeed, long arms of roses and of jasmine and clematis clambered in many places right up to the massive chimney stacks that crowned the summit of the structure.

Inside, the house was of medium size, but contained every essential of ease and comfort. No one need wish for a better or more commodious habitation; and the Mathurins had always been more than content with their lot, and had never

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envied the larger and statelier homes of their richer and grander neighbors.

What could any one indeed want on earth, they were wont to say, better than Western Lodge !

As to the garden, it was simply perfect. It contained everything which a garden ought to contain. Broad lawns, wide enough for tennis and long enough for archery ; spreading trees under whose shade to dream away the hot summer afternoons ; herbaceous borders, always gay with perennial flowers, that people came from miles away to see, and lingered for long to admire and to envy. And everywhere there were roses—Arcades, Pergolas, arches, and tall posts with iron chains swinging between ; and all were smothered under great loads of *Rêve d'Or* and *Madame Lambard*, of *Crimson Ramblers* and *Claire Jacquiers*. And then there were huge beds of them besides—bush roses and standards and half standards—*Teas*, *Hybrids*, *Bourbons*, *Penzance* briars, and *China* roses, and heaven knows how many other delightful creations ! A very revelry of blossom that filled the delighted nose with perfume and the glad eyes with beauty. For good old John had been a great rose fancier in his time, and from the traditions he had bequeathed to his successors in this matter they had never allowed themselves to fall away. Beyond the flower garden and the lawn there was a sunk fence, and then a couple of wide park-like meadows, studded with clumps of trees, through which the drive ran down to the lodge gate. Behind the house lay a walled

J. G. V. N.

garden, well stocked with fruit, and one or two hot-houses, of course, but not too many ; and there were stables too, and a gardener's cottage, with a plantation and a paddock behind them. Nothing had been left out, and yet nothing was on a large scale or difficult to keep up. The whole property was probably little over fifty acres in extent. John Mathurin had bought the land freehold out of his savings, had proceeded to build a house on it, and to lay out the gardens around it according to his own notions as to what house and garden ought to be—and very good notions they had been.

This old John Mathurin had been somewhat of a rough diamond—a city merchant in the days when city merchants were not what they are in these enlightened days—but he came of a good middle-class stock, and he had no pretension about him, and no desire to push himself out of the station of life in which it had pleased God and his own industry to place him. But with his son things had been different ; he had begun where his father left off, and Eton and Oxford had raised him to an equality with his neighbors in culture and education. He went up to business regularly, it is true, and attended to his work as a sensible man should do ; but he was a man who had had a comfortable balance at the bank to begin life with—and a balance, as we all know, makes a very great difference in the estimation in which we are held by the world. Furthermore, John Mathurin the second married well—his wife

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brought him both money and gentle blood—and when it came to the turn of old John's grandson, the third owner of Western Lodge, he found himself no longer an outsider in the pleasant home county where his pretty house was placed, but a country squire, liked and received into the inner circles of that most exclusive of country societies, and as cordially welcomed amongst them as though he were the descendant of a long line of ancestors.

So now we have come to Arthur Mathurin, the present owner of Western Lodge, who, in his turn, succeeded his father. As a young man Arthur was exceedingly handsome; he was tall, with a graceful and distinguished figure, and with the almost black hair and piercing dark eyes that were Mathurin characteristics. He had all the tastes of his father and grandfather, with a few others of his own in addition: he kept up the little place that was his birthright with scrupulous care and tender pride, and he cultivated roses with passionate ardor; but besides these inherited tastes, he was a sportsman also. He kept a couple of hunters, and rented some very good partridge shooting from an impoverished earl, whose wide but mortgaged acres adjoined his own snug little estate. The hunting and the shooting brought him into fuller sympathy with his neighbors. He became popular. He was clever, and the men liked him; better still, he was handsome, and the women smiled upon him. And a few years after he came into his inherit-

ance, he did what everybody said was the cleverest deed of his life—for he married the only child of the afore-mentioned impoverished nobleman, whose shooting he had already rented.

Lady Marvel Monaster was a penniless girl, but she exceedingly beautiful. In fact, her mother, the Countess of Lareston, had great ambitions for her lovely daughter. But Lady Marsvel disappointed her mother, and followed the dictates of her own heart. She fell desperately in love with the handsome young man who lived at her father's gates.

It has never been exactly known how and when this fact became known to Arthur Mathurin, for it is idle to deny that he was not in the least in love with Lady Marvel. But one day, by chance, they rode home fourteen miles together after hunting, and it was presumably during this ride that he made the discovery which was to lead to such momentous consequences. Be that as it may, it is certain that somehow, and in some way, he did discover that Lady Marvel had lost her heart to him.

Even then he did nothing in haste. The Mathurins were cautious people. He thought the matter over carefully; he was not at all in love with her, but he was not in love with anybody else, and possibly he was flattered—and, above, all, he was ambitious. He had long desired so to establish himself amongst the people of his native county that his position should be

unassailable. Lady Marvel's girlish adoration rendered this ambition a realizable thing. Her beauty was attractive—her position was undeniable—her poverty gave him his chance.

He walked up to Lareston Castle three days after the important discovery he had made of the state of Lady Marvel's affections, and he tendered his proposal in due form.

The old Earl, who was getting on in years, was bewildered and almost tearful. The Countess was indignant, and openly accused him of impertinence; his audacity seemed to her to be inconceivable.

Fortunately for his suit, Lady Marvel herself came into the room. She had guessed what was going on.

"I will appeal to Lady Marvel herself," said Arthur, turning quickly round to her by a happy inspiration.

"Leave the room, Marvel!" cried her mother, sharply.

"My dear—*please* go," murmured her father, distressfully.

But Marvel stood her ground. She had expected him, and she guessed.

"I am unworthy of you, I know, Lady Marvel," said her lover, bending low over the hand she held out to him; "yet from your lips only will I take my answer."

And Marvel had cried out boldly: "And I will give you my answer, Arthur, myself, and with my own lips."

Thereupon she had walked into his arms and kissed him.

After that, there was nothing to be done, from the parental point of view, but to make the best of a bad job.

Poor Lady Marvel!—our story does not concern her—she died in her first confinement, and the child who cost her her life was, to Arthur Mathurin's unspeakable disappointment, a daughter—and not a son.

What the poor woman's life might have been had she lived longer it is fruitless to speculate about. Whether, during that short year of married life she found out how little she was loved, and how entirely she had thrown her love away, has never transpired; probably she died in happy ignorance of it, for Arthur Mathurin was a gentleman, and his wife, during that short year, was always ailing. He was invariably tender and attentive in his manner to her; his tenderness was based on interested motives, for he passionately desired an heir. So passionately, that it was perhaps a good thing for poor Lady Marvel that she died three hours after the birth of the poor little despised daughter, so that she never knew how bitterly she had disappointed the man she loved.

Years went on, and trouble fell upon Lareston Castle. The Earl died, his title became extinct, and his encumbered estates went to the hammer. Arthur Mathurin bought the shooting, but the home park was cut up into farms and building

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lots, and the castle was pulled down. Lady Lareston was left homeless and almost in beggary in her widowhood. Then Arthur Mathurin did the right thing, as he always did, and offered a home to his mother-in-law. So Lady Lareston thankfully took up her abode at Western Lodge, where, as 'granny,' she ruled over her granddaughter's education.

The Countess was much broken in health and spirit in these latter days; trouble had left its traces upon her, and she had learnt to value, and even to love, the man who had robbed her of her daughter. And in Marvie, and for Marvie, she lived again!

And Arthur Mathurin remained a widower. Marvie grew from a pretty child into a lovely girl, and from a lovely girl into a truly beautiful woman. The gift of beauty came to her through both her parents, and she seemed to have evolved, in her own person, the best points of both. To her father's tall slender figure and flashing dark eyes she added the exquisite fairness and delicacy of skin of her mother, and her perfectly-moulded nose, mouth, and chin. The chin, indeed, erred perhaps by a little too much assertiveness, for whilst accentuating the courage and determination of the mother, it was not free from a certain stubborn pugnacity which distinguished her father.

And it goes without saying that Marvie was spoilt. Her father, although he had never recovered the disappointment her sex had caused him, grew, in time, to be proud of his daughter's beau-

ty. He did not, perhaps, love her very deeply, but he indulged her and allowed her to do pretty much as she liked, whilst the old Countess simply worshipped her and gave in to her smallest whim. Needless to say, Marvie rode roughshod over the prostrate and adoring form of her granny. She had done so, indeed, ever since she was born, so that it had become second nature to her. Lady Lareston was in these days much changed from the ambitious and autocratic woman who had striven to bend her daughter to her will. That daughter's death and her own troubles had broken her spirit. She had neither the strength nor the inclination to do battle with this younger and more vigorous edition of the dead Lady Marvel. She had, too, the wisdom to recognize the fact that Marvel Mathurin was a different girl altogether to Marvel Monaster. The father's nature was in her too, and her father's people were a headstrong folk.

One afternoon late in October a little party of three were assembled in the wide comfortable entrance-hall of Western Lodge. It was already dark, for the afternoons were drawing in, and the curtains had been drawn so that the glimmering misty evening was shut out. A warm fire blazed in the wide hearth, Turkish rugs covered the polished oak floor, rose-shaded lamps stood on small tables about the room, which were freely littered over with books and papers and magazines, whilst a great china bowl, full of late roses that were still plentiful in the garden, stood in the cen-

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ter of a huge oak chest which occupied a prominent position opposite the fire. There were easy chairs about, and divans against the white paneled walls. A tall grandfather clock ticked solemnly in a corner. Old John Mathurin's portrait in oils hung above the high mantel-shelf, from which his dark eyes seemed to look attentively and searchingly down upon his great-grand-daughter. Two fox terriers lay asleep in a comfortable heap together on the hearthrug, and a black Aberdeen, with high-pricked ears, sat gazing fixedly into the red coals, whilst he ruminated sleepily on topics connected with rats. Altogether it was a comfortable and homelike picture, for the hall at Western Lodge was the pleasantest place in the house, and was much frequented by its inhabitants, especially at five o'clock tea-time. It was time for five o'clock tea now, but although the old Worcester cups and saucers stood all ready, twinkling in the firelight, upon their special table at granny's elbow, the teapot and the muffins had not yet been brought in.

"We must wait for tea, of course," had said granny to the butler. And Marvie had groaned aloud as the man left the room.

"Good-bye to doing as we like, I suppose, for ever," she murmured, twisting her lithe body impatiently about in the deep arm-chair into which she had just flung herself after a series of irritable and somewhat irritating perambulations amongst the furniture.

"My poor pet," murmured granny, sympathet-

ically, without lifting her eyes from her long bone knitting needles that clicked their way steadily through the white wool they were consuming.

But a voice from behind the *Field* newspaper laughed.

"I know somebody who will go on doing exactly as she likes for ever and ever and ever!"

Marvie cast a glance of contempt toward the long Harris tweed knickerbockered legs that were stretched out of the chair opposite her.

"That's so like your ignorance, Ray. I have always told you you don't understand me one little bit!"

"Don't I?" and the *Field* was lowered for one moment to display a clean-shaved boyish face, bright blue eyes, and close-cut curly fair hair. "I expect I understand you better than you imagine my dear cousin."

"If you did understand me, you would sympathize with me," retorted Marvie with an indignant flash of her dark eyes; "instead of which you take the whole thing as a matter of course!—as if—as if—it was just a brace of partridges he was bringing home! You aren't a bit angry, you aren't a bit sorry even!"

"Why should I be angry? Hasn't Uncle Arthur a perfect right to do as he likes?—but as for being sorry—oh, yes, I am sorry—very, very sorry—for *somebody*, but not for *you*, Marvel!"

She sprang upright in her chair with an angry flush, her eyes sparkling, her breath coming short

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and quick. How lovely she looks when she is in a rage, thinks Ray Mathurin, facing her with that calm provocative smile which always drives her frantic.

"For who, then?" she cries, furiously; "you may as well finish your insult; for *who*, pray, are you sorry?"

"For young Mrs. Mathurin," answers Ray smiling quietly, and resumes his study of the *Field* newspaper.

"Don't quarrel, children," observes granny from her corner. "Darling Marvie, couldn't you sit quiet, my pet?" for Marvie is once more prancing up and down, induced to repeat her peripatetic exercises by the depth and strength of her mental indignation. "You will make yourself so hot and excited, and get so nervous, my sweet."

"*Nervous!*" repeats Miss Mathurin, with a snort of defiance, and she flings herself back into her chair with an air of exasperation. "You say that because you don't understand me one scrap better than Ray does! You neither of you can see that I am heart-broken—yes, *heart-broken!*"

"My poor sweet child," remonstrates granny, almost tearfully.

Ray chuckles a little behind his paper, and, at the sound of his untimely hilarity, Marvie is goaded into a fresh outburst.

"Oh, you may laugh! I dare say it amuses you to think that I am wretched! that I can never be happy again; that my father whom I *adored* has

played this cruel trick upon me, that he has deceived me and hoodwinked me for *months* past, springing his wicked action upon me all at once without a word of warning, so that I haven't had a chance of defending myself or of warding off the blow. Oh! you think it funny, I dare say, that I am so miserable."

"My darling, no—no!"

"Not *you*, granny, of course—though even *you* don't sympathize with me as you ought to do, considering that my dear dead mother was your daughter, and you ought to be as angry as I am."

Granny took off her spectacles and began to cry.

"It's Ray who infuriates me!" went on the angry beauty, turning round fiercely upon her cousin. "Ray who—who——"

"Who is certainly much more seriously affected and injured than you are," put in the young man quietly.

"Well—well—then *why* aren't you angry too?"

Ray laughed outright this time, and on Marvie's lovely lips there flickered the suspicion of a responsive smile, for Marvie was not devoid of a sense of humor.

"I'm never angry, you know, Marvie," answered the young man, quietly. "Life is too utterly topsy-turvy to make one angry, and if one sees the funny side of things, then 'anger' becomes impossible. There's that blooming baby,

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for instance ; how on earth can one be angry with a baby ; but one is sad sometimes—and sorry too—and, oh, yes, I *am* sorry, you know ! ” with a twinkle of malicious fun in the blue eyes glancing sideways.

“ Sorry ? ” she repeated, slowly, “ sorry for *me* do you mean ?—or for—for—— ? ”

“ For young Mrs. Mathurin,” repeated Ray once more, with brisk geniality.

The angry retort only died away on Marvie’s lips because at this moment the three dogs sat up in a row, turned their backs upon the fire, pricked up their ears, and barked simultaneously, then they rushed violently together towards the hall door: There was a sound of wheels outside.

“ They are coming ! ” cried Lady Lareston, with agitation ; “ leave off laughing, pray, and ring the bell quick, Ray.”

CHAPTER II.

YOUNG MRS. MATHURIN.

THE train had rushed steadily on nearly all day through the peaceful autumnal English landscape. Then had come the confusion of the London terminus, followed by the drive across the darkening streets. Another terminus—another scene of confusion—luggage and porters and crowded platforms. A hasty cup of tea, swallowed at the carriage window, then on again, on the last stage of the journey this time, through a country upon which the mists of evening were falling so fast that little of it was discernible save the black outlines of trees and hedges, and the glimmer of lights in the towns and villages as they flew past in the gathering darkness.

The travelers settled themselves and their dressing bags, rugs and parcels into the first-class compartment that had been reserved for them—the husband and wife opposite each other at one end, the nurse and the infant at the other.

Arthur Mathurin bent forward and took his wife's hand, and the light from the lamp above fell upon his clean-cut features, upon his dark eye and eyebrows, and upon the thick snow-white curly hair, that at fifty made people sometimes speak of him as an old man.

"You are very tired, my darling," he said, tenderly. "It's nearly over now—we are nearly home."

How he worshipped her, this second wife of his! Fifteen months of married life had not yet dimmed the lover-like ardor of his devotion to her—he was, in fact, more in love with her than ever. And yet, upon the face of it, there seemed no particular reason why he who had never loved Marvie's beautiful mother should be so desperately in love with this other. For young Mrs. Mathurin was not at all beautiful. She was small and slight. She had tiny feet and hands, and a slender waist. She looked delicate, almost frail. Her complexion was colorless, and her hair, though soft and fine, was of that nondescript dusty brown that has never yet been rhymed by poet or sung of by singer. It stuck out queerly in a little fuzz all round her head, for it was crisp and inclined to curl, so that when she stood with her back to the light it had the effect of the transparent aureole of a saint. Her nose was small and short, her mouth rather wide, and the little pointed chin below it was too small and childish for symmetry. Her only really good point was her eyes. They were large and of a wonderful clear pale gray—they almost, in fact, appeared to be luminous. She had, in addition, very white and even teeth which she showed a good deal when she smiled. And in her smile there was something magical.

But unless she smiled or looked at you very

earnestly, so that you were struck by the somewhat extraordinary character of her eyes, there was nothing remarkable at all about her. She was one of those women who are said to pass in a crowd. No one out in Australia had looked at her, no one had noticed her. She was just a little nonentity to those about her until Arthur Mathurin had come there, and then, from that moment, everything was changed.

It was in Sydney that he had met her. Repeated attacks of influenza, aggravated on the last occasion by lung trouble, that had been followed by a prolonged period of extreme weakness, had induced a London specialist to send Mr. Mathurin away for a long sea voyage.

There was no imperative reason why he should not obey the injunctions of the eminent physician whom he had consulted. He had the means to travel, and no insuperable ties to keep him at home. His daughter was quite safe at Western Lodge under the care of her grandmother, and he had no sentimental objections to leave her. As for his business, there were other partners to fulfil the light duties that now fell to his share as senior partner; his young nephew, moreover, had just been brought into the firm as junior partner, so that it was not only easy but desirable to work him as hard as was necessary.

Raymond Mathurin was an orphan, and the son of his only brother, and it was only right and proper that he should go into the family business and have plenty of work to do in it. So with a clear

conscience and a light heart, Arthur Mathurin set forth on his travels. He had started to go round the world, but he only went round half of it alone. For at Sydney he met Edna Coulston. She was not Australian but English, and had come out from England only two years ago, to earn her livelihood, poor child, on the other side of the world. When Arthur Mathurin met her she was only the hard-worked, underpaid governess in a wealthy Australian family to whom he happened to have brought a letter of introduction from friends at home. The first time he saw her, she was standing with her back to the window, amidst a crowd of noisy, clamoring children, who were her pupils. The sunshine came pouring in behind her, and her light colorless hair was turned into a sun riven cloud above her brows. He asked her some trivial question about the children, who were clinging to her skirts and hands, and she lifted her great queer-colored eyes and smiled at him as she answered—and the smile undid him then and there. He fell desperately, almost ridiculously, in love with her. In less than a month he had married her.

It was nothing to him that she was penniless and friendless, that neither in Sydney nor in England had she a friend or a relation in the world. He did not want her friends and relations, he told her—he wanted herself.

“I should like to hide you from every living soul on earth,” he had said to her, “carry you away into some wilderness, where no other eyes

save mine should see you, no other hands than mine be there to wait upon you."

If he had not been able literally to carry out this insane desire, he had at least gone as near to doing so as circumstances admitted of. He took his bride away on their wedding day, first to New Zealand, and then on to China and Japan, whence they crossed to America, and spent long months in exploring the wonders and beauties first of Mexico and then of the States. And it was probably that jealous instinct of seclusion and secrecy concerning this late love of his life which led him into the commission of a real and irretrievable error—for he kept his marriage a secret from his daughter, and from his friends and family at home. Of course there came a day when he was compelled to break this injudicious silence. An event was about to take place in New York, whither Mr. and Mrs. Mathurin had been driven by the not unnatural result of most marriages, which absolutely necessitated a return to civilization and the care and attention of experienced nurses and physicians. But even then, up to the last, he could not bring himself to write to Marvie. For suppose, after all, a fresh disaster awaited him!—supposing Edna were to be like Lady Marvel, and were to die! could he ever then even speak of her to those who had not known her! The poor man lived through weeks of agony and apprehension. Sometimes he only feared disappointment in the shape of another daughter, but oftener the direr dread of a second

bereavement lay like a cloud of inky blackness upon his heart.

Then at last everything came about well and happily, in the most natural manner in the world—and Edna became the mother of a male child. All had gone as well as possible—the mother was never in any kind of danger, and recovered safely and quickly, the baby was strong and healthy, a fine fat lusty boy, who kicked and shouted, and shook his pink fists in the air, as if in defiance of any doubts that might be entertained concerning his chances of life. And then at last, in the exuberance of his joy and thankfulness, Arthur Mathurin remembered his daughter, and realized for the first time that he had not, perhaps, treated her over well.

The very day his boy was born he wrote her a very long letter full of explanations, and full, too, of excuses for his silence. It was an admirable and plausible letter, but the bare facts were perhaps all that Marvie rightly took in of it—the two facts beside which all else paled into insignificance—that her father was married again—had been married apparently for more than a year—and that a son was born unto him, to dispossess her of his love and dispossess Ray of his inheritance!

It was perhaps little wonder that Marvie declared in no measured terms that she would never forgive him. When little Jack was considered old enough to travel, the Mathurins set their faces home towards England, for with the

addition of a nurse and an infant in arms to their traveling impediments, further wanderings became out of the question.

If Mr. Mathurin was glad enough to set foot on English soil, and to look forward to sleeping once more beneath his own roof, so was not Edna.

"It was not fatigue, but sheer terror, that made her small face so pale and her gray eyes so preternaturally large, and the hands which her husband held so icy cold. When he asked if she was tired, her teeth chattered in reply. And yet Edna was a brave woman.

"My darling, are you cold? what is it?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh, I am only stupid, Arthur!—afraid, nervous, I suppose."

"But of what? Not of Marvie, surely! Why, she will welcome you like a sister."

Edna shook her head dubiously.

"But, yes—of course! She is only two years older than you are; she will be a companion for you—a new friend—besides, she will fall in love with you, as her old father did, my sweet!"

"Oh, do you believe it possible, then, that she can ever forgive me?"

"Forgive you—for what?"

"It's not as if I had brought you anything," she continued, all her woman's instinct alive to the difficulties that confronted her. But at that Arthur Mathurin laughed gayly and triumphantly.

"Do you call that nothing?" he cried, waving

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his hand towards the white bundle of lace and cashmere in the farther corner of the carriage. "Why, darling, you have given me, in addition to your dear self, the greatest and best of all gifts, the one good thing that I needed to make my life perfect."

"Ah—that's why!" she answered, quickly; "that's just why, Arthur! She might forgive me, perhaps, in time for being poor and a nobody, but she will never forgive me for the boy."

"Oh, but that is nonsense, love! A nice good woman—and Marvie is nice and good—will open her heart at once to her small brother. Think what a new pleasure and interest he will be to her! You must not be foolish, dearest."

"No?—well I am foolish, perhaps—and—and—I don't know her, of course, and you do."

She was silenced, but not convinced. For all that she was so young and so insignificant, Edna had seen much of the rough side of life, and she knew some things much better than the handsome, distinguished husband who was more than twice her own age. It had not been her fault that he had not written at the first to tell his daughter of his second marriage. Over and over again she had gently urged him to do so, but he had always put her off.

"Time enough—time enough!" he used to say in the early days; "do let me forget home and work and family, and be happy my own way."

And after a while she had ceased to question

Young Mrs. Mathurin. 25

him about it ; but she had understood very well that she would have to pay, some day, in her own person, for his neglect of what was clearly no more than a plain duty.

When they arrived at last, and came out of the cold darkness into the warmth and light of the hall at Western Lodge, young Mrs. Mathurin's eyes sought for her step-daughter with an almost painful anxiety, for, after all, it was Marvie, not her father, who would make or mar her life.

Would Marvie be her friend?—or her foe?

In less time than it takes to write, Mrs. Mathurin felt that she had her answer to this question.

The long, lithe, graceful figure rose with slow deliberation out of the depths of the arm-chair by the hearth, the beautiful face was quite calm and self-possessed, and the fine dark eyes, so like her father's, passed her over blankly and coldly, whilst it was to Arthur to whom her hands were first outstretched in greeting.

"Dearest papa, welcome home!"

But Arthur Mathurin scarce touched his daughter's forehead with a hasty kiss, so eager was he to pass her on to Edna.

"Here she is, Marvie. I've brought her safe home, you see. Kiss your little new mother, my daughter, you and she are to be the best of friends—sisters, indeed, rather than mother and daughter!"

Oh! blundering masculine wits; for how many feminine antagonisms are not your well-meant

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floundering mistakes responsible! Marvie did not kiss her father's new wife. She only held out her hand to her, whilst her cold eyes surveyed her small person with critical scrutiny.

"All in good time, papa, dear. No doubt we shall make friends presently. Are you very cold, Mrs. Mathurin, after your journey? Come near the fire and have some tea; this is my grandmother, Lady Lareston, and my cousin Raymond."

Edna found herself in a chair by the fire. During all the long journey she had never felt so utterly chilled as she did at this moment. Her husband had taken the baby in his arms and was showing him proudly to his mother-in-law.

Lady Lareston peered through her long-handled glasses down into the white lace bundle held out for her admiration.

"Isn't he a fine little chap?" cried the infatuated father; "just look at his rosy cheeks, and the lot of dark hair he's got already, the little rascal! He'll be a Mathurin, I expect, as black as the rest of us; all but his eyes—they are his mother's, I'm glad to say, as you will see when he wakes up. Come and look at your new brother, Marvie!"

But Marvie was very busy pouring out the tea.

"Sugar, Mrs. Mathurin? one lump?—Yes;—and cream? I'm not a judge of babies, papa, or I'd look at him with pleasure, but I'm afraid my opinion upon an infant's points would be

utterly valueless." Her back was turned at the moment upon the master of the situation, and she did not even take the trouble to look round.

"Send baby up-stairs with nurse, please, Arthur," said young Mrs. Mathurin, very quietly, but with a certain insistence, and there was a faint and most unusual flush on her face; and then the child woke up and began to cry.

Lady Lareston drew back quickly, the screaming upset her nerves; and it was Ray who made a sudden rush forward then and took the infant from his uncle's arms.

"Here, give the little shaver to me, uncle," he cried, cheerily. "The nurse has gone up-stairs, I think. I'll carry him up to his nursery; I'm quite used to babies, Mrs. Mathurin—the eldest of seven myself—you needn't be afraid to trust him to me."

Edna was not at all afraid. She looked up gratefully into the bright, sunny young face, and smiled.

"Oh, thank you very much, Ray," she said, calling him quite simply and naturally by his name, with which, indeed, she was already perfectly familiar.

And Ray took the screaming little white bundle very carefully in his arms, doubling up the beautiful lace and embroidery as he did so in a truly reckless and masculine fashion, and then he carried it away slowly and steadily, up the wide oak staircase, and, oddly enough, little Jack stopped screaming as if by magic, the touch of Ray's kindly

arms, and the smile on his merry face seemed to soothe and quiet him at once.

“At least I have one friend in the house,” said young Mrs. Mathurin, gratefully, to herself, as her eyes followed him up the staircase, “but only one, I am afraid, and that not the friend I wanted most.”

CHAPTER III.

STORMS AND MEMORIES.

“MY *mother*, indeed! How dare he say that she was my mother! Granny, how could you sit by and say nothing?”

“My darling child, what would have been the use of saying anything?—besides, she *is* your step-mother, you know, you can’t deny that!”

Marvie, according to her custom when agitated, was pacing up and down, only as the space was very limited, for it was in her grandmother’s little morning room opening out of her bedroom that late at night the three were again in consultation, her perambulations were necessarily of a circumscribed nature.

“What could he have seen in her!” cried Marvie, wringing her hands, “what induced him to marry her!—why, she isn’t even good looking!—not in the very least! I call her plain—down-right *plain*!”

Like all members of a family wherein personal beauty is a heritage, Marvie looked almost with contempt upon those less generously endowed by nature than her own people. Not to be beautiful was almost a crime in her eyes. What could her father have been about!

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"Oh, come!" broke in Ray, "that's going too far, my dear. I don't call her plain, her eyes are—electric. I can find no other word for them—and her smile is ravishing!"

"Oh, *you*, Ray! you have gone over neck and crop to the enemy!" cried his cousin, turning upon him sharply. "When did she smile, pray? I never saw her smile."

"I did," said Ray, dryly.

"And then what a fool you made of yourself, my dear boy, carrying that yelling brat up-stairs!"

"Somebody had to take him—why didn't you, Marvie?"

"I!—I—touch that little brute!" she gasped.

"He's not a brute a bit—he's a very nice little fat baby—and you would say so yourself, only you are so blinded by jealousy and prejudice that you wouldn't take the trouble to look at him."

"I *hate* babies," said Marvie, earnestly and viciously, "*all* babies."

"And this one in particular apparently, just because he happens to be your father's child and your own brother."

Marvie threw him an odd look, half of resentment, half of deprecation.

"Why don't you take my side, Ray?" she said, presently, in a queerly subdued voice.

Ray laughed. "Oh, you dear spoilt child!" he cried, looking at her with softening eyes, "hasn't everybody taken your side always—ever since you were born? and hasn't it been the worst thing in the whole world for you? Now back

me up, granny—hasn't she had her own way much too much, and much too long?"

"My dear, why shouldn't Marvie have her own way always," replied the old lady, mildly, "it would seem hard if she didn't—for there's no one like her."

Ray flung up his hands in despair.

"Oh, you two! you are one as bad as the other! Marvie likes her own way—and granny likes Marvie to have her own way—it's like trying to square a circle."

Marvie laughed a little. No one—she least of all—could resist Ray long, he was such an embodiment of frank good humor.

"Well, why don't you square the circle too, and agree? it's best for everybody, probably, that 'Marvie's way' should be other people's way," she cried, gayly.

"Ah! we've come to the end of that, my dear child!"

"How do you mean?"

"There's one person in this house who will never go your way at all, Miss Marvie!"

"And who's that, pray?"

"Young Mrs. Mathurin."

Marvie uttered a veritable snort of disdain.

"That little insignificant creature! a nobody, a miserable little governess papa picked up out of the gutter! What on earth can *she* have to do with me! I should have thought you would have had more sense than to suppose such a person could ever influence *me*!"

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"You wait and see! You—the beautiful Miss Mathurin of Western Lodge—grand-daughter of the Earl of Lareston, with all the Monaster connection behind you, and all the Monaster blood in your veins—well, for all that I'd back that little nobody of a stepmother of yours, with her eyes and her smile and her queer little self-controlled face that you call plain—that is almost plain, only it just misses it by the hairsbreadth that makes all the difference—well, I'd back her against you, my dear child, any day! It's *you*, Marvie, who will knock under—not young Mrs. Mathurin!"

"Now, you are positively insulting, Ray!"

"Children, children, *don't* quarrel, and *do* go to bed!" cried poor distracted granny, who was really tired to death.

They kissed her, both of them, laughingly—Ray as well as Marvie, for he too called her 'granny,' although he was no relation to her.

"We'll go to bed, of course, granny, dear," said Marvie, "for it's past eleven, and you must be tired of us, but as to quarreling, why—" and she looked comically at Ray across the top of the old lady's white cap—

"We reserve to ourselves the right of quarreling to our dying day," put in Ray, briskly, "don't we, Marvie?"

"Why, of course! To quarrel with Ray, granny, is the salt of my life."

"The salt, pepper, mustard, and pickles of mine!" amended Ray, energetically.

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"Dear, dear!" murmured poor Lady Lareston. "You are funny children, you two! When I was young I used to think quarreling dreadfully unpleasant."

"Ah, but perhaps you never made it up!" suggested Ray, "and if not, you missed the whole value and flavor of the concoction!"

And then at last they did go, laughing both of them still as they wished each other good-night in the passage outside Lady Lareston's door.

And young Mrs. Mathurin, sitting up alone by her bedroom fire, heard their merry laughter borne along the passage, and wondered what it was all about.

"She can laugh, it seems," she said to herself, "just like any other girl, happily and gaily; but for me there was not even a smile, only those cold proud eyes that never gave me one real straight look that I could answer, and those scorn-set lips that spelt contempt in every curve of them. And how beautiful she is too! like Arthur, only with youth and coloring added. That face has got a heart behind it, I am certain, but will she shut me out of it forever!" and Edna sighed, a little weary tired sigh, such a sigh as would have never found its gentle utterance upon her lips had her husband been present. But he was down-stairs smoking his evening pipe, and for the moment she was alone and the mask was off, and she was herself.

Ah! what a blessed boon is solitude sometimes! What a rest! What a relief! These

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moments in her life—how few, how rare they were—and how she prized them ! For Mrs. Mathurin had her secret, a secret locked religiously in the depths of her own heart, a secret that never must see the light of day, and must go with her down into her grave. She did not love her husband ! that was the secret so jealously guarded, that must never, never be known or guessed at by him, or by anyone else—by him above all.

She had married him because she was homeless and friendless, because she hated the drudgery of her work, and because all work was a strain upon her somewhat fragile physical frame—because, too, he was good to her and wanted her. A kind strong man whom she felt she could trust and rely upon ; because also it was exchanging poverty for wealth, self-denial for luxury, restriction for liberty ; for all this, but not in the least because she loved him. Yet who would not have done the same in her place ? She used to ask herself the question with an almost feverish insistence ; surely almost any girl would have done the same.

If only he had not loved her quite so much ! Sometimes she used to think that if she had known it beforehand she could never have married him.

For there is nothing more terrible to a sensitive nature than that constant effort to live up to the high pressure of another person's requirements, when that other is by force of circumstances one's daily and hourly companion.

To be loved so desperately as Arthur Mathurin loved her, and to remain cold and impassive to the warmest transports of his love, and yet to be obliged to hide the coldness from his eyes, seemed to her often a more difficult task than she was able to perform.

Sometimes, indeed, he seemed to be dimly aware of her shortcomings, for he would reproach her half playfully for her coldness.

"You are a stony-hearted little thing," he would say to her. "I don't believe you love me one quarter as well as I love you."

"Oh, but indeed, Arthur—indeed—" she would protest falteringly, sometimes even with tears in her eyes.

"Ah, never mind, darling!" he would hasten to answer, "don't distress yourself, you will learn some day—am I not teaching you what love is? You are only cold because love is so strange and new to you."

Ah! if only it had been that!

That was the worst of it. She did know very well indeed what love was, and she knew also that it was not love in the least that she felt for her husband.

Gratitude, affection—tenderness even—but not love. Even now, as she sits gazing dreamily into her bedroom fire, there are visions from the past floating before her eyes—scenes out of the old days long ago, before she went away to Australia, days when she had been thankful to put a whole world between herself and her broken hopes. And

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yet now she was back in England once more—a married woman and a mother!

She had seen the world since those old days, had tasted of poverty and of servitude as well as of wealth and of adoration. She had looked upon new faces and new countries, and had seen great wonders of the earth and sea. And yet she had forgotten nothing. Not one little detail of those bygone days had escaped her memory. Not even a hairsbreadth of all the joy and all the after pain had faded. As time is reckoned, it was all over and done with long ago—and yet it lived, and was with her still. Even now as she sat watching the dying embers of her fire, she seemed to see in the glowing coals a picture of the low white vicarage house in the north country, and the apple orchard ripe with fruit, and the little figure that was herself then—yet surely now only someone else, some wraith out of the tomb—stealing forth from the schoolroom window to wait amongst the drooping branches laden with rosy-cheeked apples. And then the quick footstep across the plank bridge over the little stream below, and the familiar figure so often watched and waited for, coming nearer and nearer to the beating of her own heart; and that last day of all, when the blinds were down all over the house, because the old vicar had passed away at last, and she, his only child, was left alone in the world. How she had lain in those dear arms, under the apple trees, sobbing her heart out, and yet soothed and comforted because he was with her—for was he

not strong and true, and good? "And now I have no one but you," she had wailed to him in her despair, and then, even as she had lifted her trustful, tearful eyes to his face, all at once the change had come—the averted eyes, the embarrassed silence, the almost imperceptible alteration in his caressing touch. She remembered her own quick, breathless question, the dawning anxiety—then the sudden yawning of the black abyss between them when at last he had spoken.

"My dear child, I only wish I could do anything for you, but, you know, I am a poor man, and as to marriage—why, I felt sure you must have guessed long ago that there can be no question of marriage for me. If you would come away with me, indeed, like a sensible little woman, we might have a very good time together for a month or two—I can't see why you shouldn't—for I could manage to get away for as long as that; the money would hold out very well for about two months, I think, but haven't you guessed, then, that anything more is impossible. I thought you understood!"

She understood then, at least. And as she wrenched herself violently and wildly out of his encircling arms, the blue heavens had seemed to turn black over her head, and Hell itself to have opened before her despairing eyes.

Well, it was long ago now. More than three years had gone by since that day; and three years are often an Eternity in a young life; but the blackness of that hour of humiliation was with

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her still, would be with her, she believed, until her dying day. There are just one or two scenes in every life which are cut so deep into the heart that they can never be entirely blotted out.

So with the opening of this new chapter of her career, the old page rolled back once again and lay once more in its naked crudeness before her weary eyes. The man who had spoken those damning words under the apple boughs of her father's glebe had passed out of her life—she had never seen him since; she knew not, indeed, whether he were alive or dead.

But the words that he had spoken remained—cruel words that had broken her heart and tarnished her self-respect and shattered her illusions—these lived still, and their power to sting and to cut had never died or faded. Edna Mathurin told herself, often, that she would carry those wounds with her to her grave.

CHAPTER IV.

A DIVIDED HOUSEHOLD.

It was a Saturday morning in April, and Arthur Mathurin and his nephew were pruning the roses.

This sublimest and most important of all functions connected with the culture of the queen of flowers was, in the Mathurin family, never by any chance confided to the tender mercies of any gardener, however skilful he might be.

Arthur Mathurin pruned his own roses, as his father and his grandfather had done before him. It was almost a religion with him to do so. He had, moreover, during the days when his adopted nephew had been his sole male heir, taken the pains to instruct him also in the art, so that Ray was fully competent to act as his assistant.

That Ray was equally delighted and interested to-day in the cultivation of the rose trees, which were now never likely to belong to himself, was only an additional proof of the sunny and happy temperament which was his distinguishing charm.

It would be, no doubt, too much to say that Raymond Mathurin had not been disappointed by his uncle's second marriage and by the birth of his little boy. Ray had been for many years accustomed to look forward to becoming some

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day the owner of Western Lodge. Old John Mathurin had by will and testament left his small property strictly entailed in the male line—and so, believing the pleasant house and sunny acres to be his lawful inheritance, Ray had thrown his whole heart into the place. Nevertheless, he had been the very first to declare that his uncle had been perfectly justified in marrying to please himself, and to acknowledge, with sincere congratulations, the birth of the child who had dispossessed him.

Yet there had been other hopes and dreams as well, to which, seemingly, the end had come at the same time. It was to these that Arthur Mathurin presently made allusion, as, stepping a pace back upon the grass walk that surrounded the rose garden, he surveyed his own labors and those of his nephew with critical satisfaction.

“Cut that Marie Baumann well back, Ray—there’s a lot of weak wood in the middle wants taking out—and top those young shoots a bit, I think; there, that’s better!” as Ray plied his pruning knife vigorously. “I wonder if the little chap will take to rose pruning as well as you do?” he observed, pensively.

“Bound to, I should say, sir; it’s in the blood, you see,” replied Ray, cheerily.

“Yes; and yet Marvie never cared a hang for the roses, save to stick one in her hair or her waist-belt.”

“Oh—well—Marvie, you see—” began Ray, in a drawling way, as he stooped down over a

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little bush *noisette* at his feet, and he did not go on with his sentence. His uncle, however, finished it for him.

"Marvie is a woman, of course, and it's doubtful as yet how the family characteristics of the Mathurins are reproduced in the female line. It is curious, is it not, that Marvie is the first Miss Mathurin of Western Lodge? Neither my father nor my grandfather, as you know, had any daughters."

A little silence; then the older man spoke once more. "As we are on the subject of Marvie, Ray——"

"We had better begin Jack's instruction in rose pruning as soon as ever he can hold a knife," broke in Ray, hastily, pretending not to hear his uncle's remark.

But Arthur Mathurin had something to say, and he meant to say it. He waited a minute or two and then he began again, speaking quietly and with deliberation.

"You are, perhaps, aware of the views which I entertained at one time with regard to Marvie and yourself?"

"Perhaps I am," replied the young man, drily.

"And I suppose you have realized that circumstances are now considerably altered?"

"It is scarcely necessary, is it, sir, to remind me of that," and the color rose slowly in Ray's fair face.

"Well, you know, my boy, I don't want you to blame me for it——"

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"Have I ever blamed you, sir?"

"No—no—you have behaved like a man and a gentleman, like your poor father's son all through—I know that very well."

"Why, then, say anything at all about it, sir? I assure you I know my place now, perfectly, and I have never overstepped the line."

"I am convinced of it, Ray. But as to knowing your place, as you call it—well, there's just a word or two I wanted to say to you about that, if you will listen to me. When I brought my wife and child home last October, it certainly did not seem to me that there could be any further question of that union between your cousin and yourself, which had no doubt been a favorite scheme of mine until Jack's birth altered the whole aspect of future arrangements. But since yesterday a new development has arisen."

Ray looked up quickly.

"Yesterday, in a conference up-stairs in my private room, Allen informed me of his decision to retire from business at midsummer."

Mr. Charles Allen was Arthur Mathurin's partner, a man of his own age, clever business-like, and experienced, upon whose shoulders, in fact, the main work and responsibility of the firm had long rested.

"That is, indeed, a surprise, sir," cried Ray, in genuine astonishment. "Is he ill? He will be a very great loss to you, I think."

"A great loss, certainly, but not, I hope, an irreparable one. Allen, it seems, has been for

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some time back anxious about himself—there is some chronic weakness of the heart which causes him uneasiness, and he has now consulted Sir James Wright—the heart specialist, you know—with the result that Sir James strongly advises him to retire from business. This Allen has determined to do ; he spoke to me about it only yesterday, and you are the first person to whom I have mentioned it.”

“ You have not told Jarrett yet, then ? ” Mr. Jarrett was the other partner.

“ No—not yet. I shall speak to him on Monday morning.”

Ray secretly wondered why he, the youngest and least important of the partners in “ Mathurin & Sons,” should have been the first to be told the news.

This secret question his uncle proceeded to answer.

“ Of course, the present partnership dissolves with Allen’s departure ; there will have to be new Articles drawn out, and an entirely new division of work—and of proceeds ; everything, in short, must be reconstructed.”

There was a little silence. Ray conscientiously refrained from putting a question, although he was naturally considerably excited ; his own share of the business was a very small one—a matter of between two and three hundred a year only ; any increase on that would necessarily mean much to him.

Mr. Mathurin finished off the *La France* stand-

ard on which he happened to be employed before he went on with his communications.

"I have," he then said, slowly, "decided to bring your name into the new articles of partnership as second to my own for a term of twenty years, by which time Jack will be old enough to put in his own claims."

Ray dropped his pruning knife upon his boots.

"Uncle!—do you mean—do you mean—that I am to go in over Jarrett's head?"

"Certainly I do. Jarrett is a very worthy, hardworking creature, but he has no possible claim upon us; he began as an office boy, and has raised himself from that position to that of a partner in the business by sheer hard work and plodding industry; he never put a shilling into the business, and he makes a very decent income out of it—quite as much, I should say, as he is at all worth. My father never intended Jarrett to be anything more than a stop-gap. It is in the hands of the Mathurins and the Allens that the business must be kept and carried on. Allen, of course, will continue to draw a considerable income as a sleeping partner, but he is a bachelor and likely to remain so, and he has no nephew to bring forward, whereas I have both a nephew and son," added Arthur Mathurin, with a pleasant smile and a friendly glance at his nephew.

After a moment or two, in which Ray vainly struggled to express his feelings, his uncle remarked casually—

"After October, when the new arrangements

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will come into operation, your annual share of the business should, in an ordinarily good year, be about two thousand five hundred ; if the year be an exceptionally good one it might even be as much as three thousand.

"I don't know what to say, uncle, or how to thank you !"

"Well, don't say anything, Ray—that's the best way, I think. But you see, don't you, there is now no reason at all why you should not marry in a year's time, and you can't do better, I think, than marry Marvie."

"Oh, as to that, sir—well, I had rather not discuss it at all, if you will forgive me for saying so. I only wish to say that I have no sort of reason for supposing that Marvie has the slightest inclination to marry me."

"Well, you had better see if you can't influence her inclinations a little, my boy ! Come, come, don't turn away, Ray ; I am saying nothing, surely, that need give you offence !—am I not Marvie's father ?"

Ray restrained himself with an effort, but he averted his eyes, and his face was very red.

"I know, sir, that you mean everything that is kind, but I can't endure that we should discuss Marvie as if she were a bale of goods, and—and—to talk about her feelings is—is, it seems to me—well, quite impious."

Arthur Mathurin laughed a little, not unkindly. He was in love himself, so, for a wonder, the older man understood the young one.

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"I'm not talking about her feelings, you young gaby!" he cried, banteringly. "I leave those to you. My business is with her pocket, and when I tell you that I shall give my daughter twenty thousand pounds on the day of her marriage with any man I thoroughly approve of, I am only telling you what it is very important for you to know. If you should turn out to be the man of Marvie's choice, it will be an advantage to you in every way, and, I may add that the arrangement would be an entirely satisfactory one to myself."

Then the lunch bell rang, and the two amateur gardeners gathered up their tools and wended their way in silence back to the house.

But how much of all this was due to Edna Mathurin's influence Ray was never destined to know.

Not that Mrs. Mathurin had ever made to her husband any suggestions concerning the future of his daughter. Edna was much too wise and tactful a little person to be guilty of such an indiscretion; but she liked Ray very much, and she had very soon guessed his secret. Ray had been uniformly good to her, and she was grateful to him, and felt that if she could do him a good turn she would gladly do so, and then, besides all this, Edna was very human, and was by no means above the very natural and feminine desire to have her home to herself.

Since October, young Mrs. Mathurin had not had a particularly agreeable time of it. Marvie, who could be so charming and so lovable to those

she liked, had been systematically and doggedly antagonistic to her father's second wife. The silent antagonism of one woman to another is one of those indescribable situations which baffles analysis. Marvie never said and scarcely ever did anything that could, in any sense, be called offensive. She was perfectly and scrupulously polite to her stepmother, she failed in no single detail of seemliness and propriety of conduct towards her, and yet, somehow, it was patent both to her victim and to everybody who entered the house that there was an immeasurable gulf fixed between them—a gulf which placed Mrs. Mathurin as far away from her husband's daughter as though she were still an inhabitant of Australia.

It is a mystery how these things are done, and Edna, who was interested in human problems, often tried in vain to analyze to herself the exact quality of the ingredients employed by her unfriendly stepdaughter. It was a puzzling process.

Marvie, as I have said, was scrupulously polite to her—too polite, in fact, for in her very politeness there lurked a covert rudeness; her words were unimpeachable, and yet her manner was a veiled insult. Edna was inclined to think the chief offence lay in the matter of averted eyes. Marvie never looked her fully in the face; just a fleeting glance now and then, a glance withdrawn as soon as given, and then the eyelids with their long dark lashes would fall, or else the eyes would stray away—out of the window, into the fire, round the room, anywhere and everywhere, save

in the face of the woman who was her daily and hourly companion.

Well, one cannot make a quarrel out of averted eyes, and Edna was too sensible to attempt to do so, and yet, the pain of them to her was acute. She knew by them, without needing to be told, that Marvie was obdurate; that she had set her teeth, and determined never, never to unbend or be her own human self to the woman whom she chose to regard as an interloper and as the usurper of her mother's place.

Edna felt that if Marvie had even remembered her own mother her attitude might have been more pardonable, but Marvie had not even that poor excuse for her inveterate antipathy. There was nothing to be done but to wait. Time alone could soften the sharp edges; and, perhaps, as time went on, some accident or some alteration of circumstance might put it within her power to draw that sullen beautiful girl nearer to herself and for such accident or circumstance young Mrs. Mathurin determined to wait. But, meanwhile, her life in her husband's home was not a very happy one. Arthur was up in London all day, and every day, with the exception of Saturdays and Sundays, and Ray, whose sunny presence might have brought about a better understanding, had had his rooms in town since his uncle's marriage, and only came down occasionally for week-end visits. And on Saturdays and Sundays Arthur Mathurin exacted Edna's time and whole attention, so that his daughter's conduct escaped

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his notice. Of course, Edna had her baby, and many a lonely hour did she wile away in his nursery, but after all, a baby is no real companion to an intelligent woman, however dearly she may love it, and Edna, often felt herself to be as utterly alone in the world now as she had been in that noisy household at Sydney from which her husband had taken her away. She was better fed and better dressed, and had more money in her pocket, certainly, but she was every whit as solitary. The household at Western Lodge was split up into two factions—Lady Lareston's morning room—into which Edna had never been invited to set foot—being the nucleus of the adverse party, whilst she had the full run of the public rooms to herself. Even the servants seemed to be divided in their allegiance, half of them refusing to take her orders without a reference to 'My Lady,' of whose aristocratic name Edna became thoroughly tired. Nevertheless, and in spite of many unpleasant little details, Edna made no outward complaint of her worries. She was brave and she was sweet-tempered, and if she had loved her husband she would, probably, have talked it all over with him and have made light of her difficulties.

But the lack of love stood in her way sadly. She could not open her heart to him. There were shut and locked doors in it which must be forever closed against him; and this matter of his daughter's antagonism was one of the things she felt that she could never discuss with him. It would have annoyed and worried him badly,

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and he gave her so much, and she in return gave him so little, that it was impossible to her to cause him needless annoyance and worry by any complaints against Marvie. So, as in other things, she learnt to shut the trouble up in her own heart and to speak of it to no one.

And now there came a little respite in the tension of her life, for Marvie was away from home. Every Spring, and nearly every Autumn, Marvie was invited to pay a long visit to a cousin of her mother's who lived in an adjoining county. Sir William Wishaw was a wealthy man, and was owner of a fine house and a beautiful park, in which he entertained his friends and neighbors, largely and lavishly. His wife, who was a good deal younger than himself, and a very pretty woman, loved society and excitement with all her heart. Fairfield Hall was accordingly crammed with successions of staying visitors, whilst dinners, dances, theatricals, and garden parties succeeded each other in an uninterrupted flow, according to the time and season of the year.

Needless to say, Marvie always looked forward very much to these gay episodes of her life. Her cousin's wife was so little older than herself that she was almost like an elder sister to her, and they were fast friends; but it is to be feared that Lady Wishaw's influence over her was not altogether beneficial. Sophy Wishaw was inordinately fond of dress and admiration—excitement was the very breath of her existence; and although it cannot justly be said of her that she had hitherto ever

actually overstepped the bounds of discretion or of wifely duty, yet there is no doubt about it that she was extremely frivolous, and, at times, almost recklessly careless of her own good name and of the opinion of the world about her. Lady Wishaw found in Marvie a most useful and congenial co-adjutor. She was, perhaps, fond of the girl too in her own way, but that way was a selfish one, and it is certain that she would never hesitate to sacrifice Marvie, or any other friend, to her own benefit or pleasure. Nevertheless, she distinctly liked the society of her elderly husband's young cousin, and was always delighted to welcome her to her house.

Marvie was a creditable-looking young lady to have about her ; for she was handsome and attractive, and always commanded a good deal of attention. A vivacious—not to say flirtacious— young married woman often finds a pretty girl of the greatest use to her in her plans and schemes for her own amusement. If there were too many men in attendance on herself, for instance, Sophy had only to tell her husband that they were Marvie's would-be lovers, and to lament prettily in her conjugal confidences that Marvie was such a dreadful flirt that she could not get her to think seriously of any one of them.

Moreover, she was not in the least jealous of Marvie, although she genuinely admired her good looks. "They do not clash with mine," she naïvely remarked to a special admirer of her own ; and she was right.

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The two friends were an absolute contrast. Sophy Wishaw was as fair and small and kittenish as Marvie was tall and dark and stately. "The men who admire me are never likely to admire her," added Lady Wishaw, with frank candor ; and the man she spoke to had, with ready acquiescence, agreed with her.

"I don't admire her particularly, for one," he had hastened to say ; "I like 'em small." And Lady Wishaw's blue eyes had smiled graciously and sweetly upon him.

These remarks had been made at Fairfield Hall on the day of Marvie Mathurin's arrival there, and the man who had stated that he did not admire her had just seen her for the first time.

She had gone away up-stairs now to unpack and to dress for dinner, and Sophy had taken the opportunity of eliciting what she called an unprejudiced opinion of her friend's appearance, The result was quite satisfactory to her own vanity.

CHAPTER V.

A WILD SCHEME.

"You won't fail me, will you, Marvie?"

"I don't half like it, Sophy."

"But do think what a good time we will have! and it's only for two days. Bill is so seldom away. I hardly ever get such a chance of a lark up to town; do be nice about it, darling?"

"Well, why don't you tell Bill we are going? I'm sure he is awfully good to you, Sophy; no husband could be more indulgent; if you were just to tell him what you wanted to do whilst he is away, he would be certain to consent, and then we should both be quite happy about it, and I am sure we should enjoy ourselves in London fifty times more."

Sophy Wishaw remained silent for a minute or two. The two young women were sauntering up and down a sheltered sunny terrace walk, on the morning after Marvie's arrival at Fairfield, and Lady Wishaw had just propounded an astonishing scheme which had been brewing in her brain for twenty-four hours past.

To-night there was to be a dinner party of neighbors, or 'natives,' as Lady Wishaw some-

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what sneeringly described the very worthy, if somewhat uninteresting, country squires and their dames who were to be their guests. And on the following day Sir William Wishaw was obliged, unexpectedly, owing to grave misconduct on the part of his bailiff, to go up to his shooting lodge in Inverness-shire. He was a man who very rarely left home unaccompanied by his wife and household, but the present occasion necessitated his doing so ; there were matters to be investigated at Dooie Castle which imperatively required his presence, and, as at this time of the year the house in Scotland was all shut up, and left to the sole charge of an old woman, who acted as caretaker, it was practically impossible for Lady Wishaw to accompany him.

Now, although Bill Wishaw was the kindest and most indulgent husband imaginable, he was not blind to the fact that a man of over sixty who leaves a pretty, lively young wife of five-and-twenty alone to her own devices has only himself to thank if gossip-mongers make too free with her name. He trusted Sophy entirely, and, indeed, he wished her to enjoy herself as much as she liked, but he preferred that her amusements should always take place under the safeguard and shelter of his own observation. In this instance he considered it most fortunate that an elderly widowed aunt of Sophy's should be due to arrive at Fairfield on the very day that he was obliged to go north.

“ But for your aunt Isabella, I should have

had to ask Trafford to shorten his visit," he had said to his wife.

"My dear Bill," laughed Sophy, "what *has* poor Mr. Trafford done?"

"Oh, he's *done* nothing, of course, but he is a bachelor, and a man who is pretty well known; I couldn't very well have left him here alone with you."

"He wouldn't have been alone with me; there's Marvie Mathurin."

"I don't consider Marvie a sufficient chaperone; you are just a couple of giddy girls together, my dear! But it's all right, as your aunt Isabella is coming; so Trafford may stay, and I shall be back late on Saturday night, or, at latest, Sunday morning, just after all the people arrive whom you are expecting for the week-end."

And Sophy kept silence, and took care not to mention to her husband that, no sooner had she found out that Sir William was likely to go to Scotland on the Wednesday morning, than she had written off, post-haste, to her aunt Isabella to put off her visit to Fairfield from Wednesday to the following Saturday. She had other ideas in her head than entertaining her old aunt.

"Not likely that I am going to waste two whole days of rare liberty," she had said to Trafford, with a toss of her little head. "I haven't had such a real chance of a lark for years!"

"You will do as I suggest, then?"

"Yes, of course; but we must be very careful. It's an awful risk, you know!"

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"Not a bit of it ; with Miss Mathurin, how can there be any difficulty, at least if she is, as you say, trustworthy ?"

"Oh, Marvie's all right, she is a good sort ; she is devoted to me ; she will do anything for me. Besides, she will enjoy the lark herself ; she doesn't often get a couple of days in town ; she will like it immensely."

But apparently Marvie was not quite so amenable as Sophy expected to find her.

With all Marvie Mathurin's faults, and they were legion, she was, at any rate, honest. The byways of deception and falsehood did not appeal to her ; she preferred methods that were above-board and open ; and it had always been a source of astonishment to her to find that Sophy Wishaw absolutely reveled in the more devious courses of secrecy and intrigue. To plot, and plan, and scheme ; to tell one little fib, here, and another little fib there ; to hoodwink one person, and to allow another to believe what was not strictly true, was all a sheer delight to Sophy.

"I wonder you are not terrified," Marvie had said once to her friend, about some really trivial incident, over which she had managed and arranged—to put it mildly—a whole structure of fabrications. "You might so easily be found out."

"Only I never am," had retorted her cousin, merrily ; "and as to being frightened, why, it's a positive delight to me to plan things. Only think how dull life would be if one had nothing to work and dodge for !"

But this last escapade seemed to Marvie to be of a more serious nature than any that Sophy had ever hitherto contemplated. Her old cousin Bill had always been kind to her, and she did not like the idea of being a party to the deceiving of him.

"Why don't you tell him?" she reiterated.

"So I shall tell him, you goosey, but not till afterwards. I shall tell him when he comes back, and it's all over, and nobody any the worse; I shall make it appear that it was a sudden freak, a thing got up all in a moment; he will growl a bit, but he will forgive me all right, and we shall have had our fun. But if I were to tell him now—beforehand—"

"He might forbid it, you think?"

"He would certainly forbid it; and then we couldn't very well do it, you see, not without running much graver dangers."

"Would he then object so very much?" inquired Marvie, rather seriously.

"Well—you see, Marvie, dear old Bill is rather antiquated in his ideas. Oh, I don't mean to say that he isn't broad-minded and lenient to me, because he *is*. Bless him! But sometimes he takes a prejudice into his head, and then—he's like a mule—nothing will drive him."

"Yes?—and what is this particular prejudice, Sophy?"

Lady Wishaw colored a little. "Oh—well, isn't a most silly and unreasonable one, of course, but—I really can't imagine why or wherefore—"

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but he has taken a stupid prejudice against Mr. Trafford."

"Mr. Trafford?" and Marvie's eyebrows went up in surprise. "Really? but why? he seems such a very nice man."

"Yes, isn't he?" a little eagerly. "Oh, he *likes* him all right as a companion to himself, and a guest, and so on; but he has got a silly notion into his head that women—ladies, I mean—ought not to be seen about with him. I am sure I don't know why," went on Lady Wishaw, rather hurriedly, "but perhaps in his youth Mr. Trafford may have been a little fast, or something of the kind; I am sure I don't quite understand, and it's very silly of dear old Bill, isn't it, because Mr. Trafford is nearly forty now, and whatever happened when he was a young man must be all past and done with."

For a few minutes neither of them spoke; then Marvie said rather gravely—

"In that case—I—I almost think we had better not go and stay at his house in Half-Moon Street."

"Oh, but you don't know what a nice little house it is!" cried Sophy, eagerly.

"You have been there?" asked Marvie, quickly.

Sophy blushed right up to the roots of her gossamer yellow hair.

"Yes—once—only just for tea, you know. I—I wasn't there more than ten minutes; he wanted me to look at a new picture he had bought."

"And did you tell Bill?"

"Oh, *yes*!—of course I did." Sophy felt that lie to be an absolute (though cruel) necessity. Why would Marvie ask such tiresome questions!

"And he did not mind?"

"Oh, no—not a bit. He quite understood how it came about."

Marvie was thoughtful for a moment.

"Well," she said at last, "of course that rather alters things. If Bill did not mind your going there when you were quite alone, I can't well see how he could object when there are two of us. Only, in that case, why not tell him?"

Lady Wishaw laughed a little. "My dear little cousin, believe me, I understand how to manage my own husband much better than anybody else does. When you are married yourself, you will find out all these secrets. One gets to learn all their little fads and fancies, you see, and to know how to humor them. When it's all over, and Bill comes back, I shall tell him *everything*, you may be quite sure of that. But it would really be stupid to tell him beforehand."

But even then Marvie was not wholly satisfied, and in the end Lady Wishaw was obliged to call in extraneous help. Claude Trafford was to be told off to overcome Miss Mathurin's scruples.

It was after lunch that he found an opportunity of speaking to her alone. Lady Wishaw had gone away to supervise some floral decorations for her dinner table. Sir William was interviewing his head keeper in the gun-room, and Marvie had

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sauntered through the drawing-room window into the conservatory, where Marshal Niel and Sofrano roses hung in a curtain of sweetness all over the roof. The conservatory was, in truth, a delightful place to linger in. It was long and wide, and a broad strip of red matting ran down the center of it, to where a low red upholstered divan invited repose at the further end. Marvie strolled down the flowery avenue, glancing admiringly, as she walked, at the great bushes of crimson and white azaleas, at the primulas, and the cyclamen, the spireas, and the pink carnations, and endless other lovely flowers that were ranged in pots on either side of her. Sometimes she stopped and buried her nose in some one or other of the fragrant blossoms, and once she picked a 'Duchess of Fife' carnation, and fastened it into her dress, just below the soft contour of her charming chin, where it nestled most becomingly against her beautiful face. And when she reached the divan at the end, she turned to retrace her steps, and then it was that she perceived Claude Trafford coming in through the open doorway towards her.

Marvie had as yet scarcely spoken to her fellow-guest. She had heard of him many times, but had never met him till yesterday, and, in her own shrewd mind, she decided that she would certainly have very little to do with him.

He was 'Sophy's last' to her ; and she knew, from a long experience of her dear friend's little peculiarities, that it did not do to tamper with gentlemen who held that favored position. Sophy

brook no interference with her own special admirers, of whom there was a long and ever-varying list. She was generous enough, generally, to provide some less interesting individual for the entertainment of her women friends. "Mr. So-and-so is for *you*," she would say to them with naïve candor, and the reservation implied was quite clear to her female hearers, namely, that Mr. Somebody else was exclusively apportioned to herself.

Marvie had specially commended herself to Lady Wishaw's affections because she never poached on her preserves. On this occasion, however, she had as yet failed to produce the usual dummy gentleman who was to be Marvie's fair share of the spoils. He was coming, she had been informed, on Saturday, amongst a number of other guests. His name was Captain Stacey, and Lady Wishaw added that he was "quite a nice little chap, and had expectations." Marvie was thoroughly convinced, from this description, that she would probably find him profoundly uninteresting. However, in the cause of friendship, she was prepared to make the best of him—when he came. Meanwhile she knew better than to endeavor to ingratiate herself with Mr. Trafford.

As a matter of fact, she had scarcely as yet looked that gentleman fully in the face, and had only a vague impression that he was a fine-looking man, gifted with the easy and pleasant conversational powers of one who is accustomed to the ways of good society. Now, as he advanced up

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the broad red matting of the conservatory towards her, Marvie Mathurin really looked at him and observed his critically, for the first time.

But if there is one thing that is more certain than anything else in the world, it is that Claude Trafford must have a new chapter to himself.

CHAPTER VI.

AN AWKWARD DILEMMA.

CLAUDE TRAFFORD was a very striking-looking man. Tall, broad-shouldered, and splendidly made as to his physique, it detracted little from the magnetism of his effective personality that his face was lacking in almost every element that constitutes what is commonly regarded as beauty.

Men usually called him ugly ; women, never ! Men were apt to dwell upon the rough irregularity of his features ; upon the smallness of his deep-set and almost colorless gray eyes, or upon the unsymmetrical breadth of his nose and mouth. Women never considered these blemishes at all. To them he was the man of strength and power ; mental power as much, or even more, than physical power, which, to the feminine imagination, means nearly everything. There was, moreover, a subtle fascination about this man of the big body and the ugly face ; he had a charm, of manner that took one by storm, and a smile that was exceedingly persuasive ; whilst the quality of his voice made a positive delight to listen to his speech.

With such rare and attractive gifts, it is scarcely wonderful that Trafford never failed to score an

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unqualified success amongst women. Wherever, indeed, he chose to set himself in earnest to the task, he invariably won from them often more than he desired, and, always very decidedly, considerably more than he deserved ; and, although he was now over forty years of age, there was, as yet, no appreciable diminution in the number and completeness of his facile conquests.

When Marvie saw this man advancing towards her, along the center of the flower-bordered pathway of the conservatory, she became aware, all at once, of something new, and eminently interesting, in his attitude. It was as though she were looking at him for the first time ; and, in point of fact, this was no doubt the case, because he was now, for the first time, putting forth himself in his peculiar strength for her individual observation and benefit. She saw him, therefore, no longer from the standpoint of a dispassionate and uninterested looker-on, but as he had appeared to all the women who had been interested in him, to their peril or their perdition, from the beginning of his career. For there was something dangerous about this man—an undefinable atmosphere that partly attracted and partly repelled, a something that overwhelmed the senses, even whilst the better judgment recoiled in startled rebellion from it. He was of himself, in short, a kind of Danger Signal—and, for that very reason, an irresistible force ; for your average woman doesn't want to run away from a danger of this kind in the very least. She likes it, she

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courts it, she revels in it. Perhaps, therefore, she has only herself to thank, if, in the end, she retires, maimed and wounded to the heart, from the unequal encounter.

Marvie was conscious of a slight quickening of her pulses as the man approached her.

"I have come to you on a mission, Miss Mathurin," began Trafford, in that honey-sweet voice of his, that had a little entrancing and indescribable burr in it; and as he spoke, he smiled, more with his eyes than with his lips. "I want you to do me a favor, a great kindness; I am sure you will not refuse?"

"I suppose Sophy has sent you?" said Marvie, with a little uneasy laugh; and she tried to look at him fully, but found she could not, so her lovely dark eyes sank beneath his.

"Well yes—partly I am sent, and partly I come on my own initiative."

"It is about this—this escapade—up to London, I suppose?"

"That is rather an ugly word. Suppose we talk of it as an expedition instead; that sounds better, doesn't it? You will come with us, won't you? You won't let any little fanciful scruples spoil all the pleasure for your friend, and for me? You see, we can't very well go without you."

"It would be so easy for Sophy to tell her husband," demurred Marvie, looking away uneasily.

"It is always easy to take husbands into confidence, certainly, but it is not always easy to predict the results of such impulses of candor."

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Marvie met the amused look in his eyes as he spoke, and she could not help smiling ; after all, was she not, perhaps, exaggerating the importance of this little trifling affair.

It was as though he guessed the drift of her swerving thought.

"You are looking at the whole thing much too seriously, my dear Miss Mathurin," he said ; "there is really nothing wrong or dramatic about the project. Two charming ladies consent to give a very unworthy, but perfectly steady and respectable, middle-aged bachelor the pleasure of their company as his guests for a couple of nights ; there is nothing in the least unusual about it. "*Honi soit qui mal y pense* " ; do not let us invent crimes, my dear young lady ; God knows, there are plenty of real sins in the world without setting up sham ones. There is no sin at all in what Lady Wishaw proposes to do, and if there should be any diversity of opinion about it, between our dear host and hostess, why, in the name of justice, is *she* not likely to have the better judgment of the two ? If there is no harm in the *thing*, how can Bill Wishaw's knowing, or not knowing about it till next week, make the slightest difference ? "

And then, from argument and sophistry, he proceeded to what was perhaps the surest method of all, he began to wheedle. He took Marvie's hand and held it fast, although she struggled a little at first to get it free.

"Come," he said, almost tenderly, in a lowered

voice, "be the good little pal I know you can be if you choose. Let me have the pleasure of being your host; you must not suppose it is only to make use of you that I want you to come? You don't imagine it is *only* for Sophy, do you?" This last was a mere whisper, and somehow sent the thrill of delightful possibilities through her veins. She succeeded in drawing away her hand.

"She and I are old friends, of course," he went on, "but that doesn't make me blind, and I want you a little bit for your own sake, too; I want to know you better—to see more of you; won't you give me that happiness?—eh?"

And then she gave in, utterly and completely. She had no power to resist that pleading voice; she was even too weak to make terms to her surrender. She promised to go, to hold her tongue, to do, in short, exactly as he told her.

He left her with triumph and exultation in his heart, for he was a masterful man, and, by hook or by crook, he generally managed to get his own way.

"It's all right," he said later to Lady Wishaw, "she has consented."

"How on earth did you manage it; she was as obstinate as a mule with me? but you are so clever, Claude! You brute! I believe you made love to her; confess it at once!"

"Only a little make believe, my dear," laughed Trafford, lazily. "One has to use the tools under one's hand, you know, and it was important to secure her consent and help. You

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needn't be in the least alarmed, you know I don't care a rap about your tall brunettes with flashing eyes ; sweet little blonde, blue-eyed women have always been my fancy," and he smiled into her eyes so delightfully that Lady Wishaw's vanity was soothed and her fears put to flight.

And yet Claude Trafford, hardened old roué as he was, was conscious already of a new and most piquante attraction in the personality of the dark-eyed girl with the beautiful stately figure. It was no doubt true that little women with blue eyes and golden hair had been more usually his preference, but a little variety is always pleasing, and for a change—just for a change—a dark woman might possibly hold out some fresh points of attraction to his somewhat jaded and satiated inclinations.

Nothing, however, was farther from Marvie's thoughts than to encourage any flirtatious advances on the part of her cousin's admirer ; and when the party of three found themselves, a day or two later, actually safely located in Mr. Trafford's little bachelor house in Half-Moon Street, her whole conduct and demeanor was so absolutely reserved, and so unimpeachably discreet, that no matron of matured age could have enacted the rôle of chaperone more completely than she did.

She was there, she felt, not to amuse herself, but to lend protection to her friend, and to prevent, if possible, the voice of scandal from tampering with her name. She had reasoned herself into believing that she could best serve her cousin

Bill by looking diligently after his wife ; but she was woman enough of the world to know, that if she angered Sophy by permitting even the faintest attention from their host to be diverted to herself, she would not only turn her from a friend into an enemy, but would, moreover, destroy the very object for which she had consented to accompany her.

For the first day, all went off delightfully. The two ladies never parted company ; they shopped together a little whilst Trafford went to his club, then they lunched with him at the Savoy, and mooned away the afternoon at a picture gallery, dined early at the Carlton, and a box at the theater wound up the day's amusement.

There arose, however, a small crumpled rose leaf in Lady Wishaw's lot, a cloud the size of a penny roll on her horizon.

"Who do you suppose I met at the club?" Trafford had said to her, as he sat behind her in the box of the St. James's Theater, and whispered in her ear—"Moreton Wishaw, your brother-in-law."

"Good heavens!" Sophy turned as white as the feather fan she was pressing against her face. "I had no idea he was in town! What crushing luck! Did he see you?"

"I am not sure; he was standing in the hall reading a letter—I turned away into the smoking-room—I think he looked up. He may have seen me, I can't be certain; but, after all, it doesn't matter much, does it?"

"It matters *everything* if he sees me with you!—don't you know that Moreton *hates* me; he has tried once or twice already to make mischief between me and Bill."

"Well, I don't see what mischief he can make now. We have *her*, you see," indicating Marvie with a slight movement of his hand; "it's not as if you were alone in London. There, my dear girl, you see now the wisdom of my decision; *you* were for throwing prudence to the winds and coming up by yourself; I, fortunately, had more sense, and insisted upon Miss Mathurin's being with you. Now, even if your proper brother-in-law does see us, are we not *three* of us? and what can he say?"

"I don't know what he will *say*," replied Sophy, who was still pale, "but I know what he will probably *do*. He will telegraph to Bill that he has seen me."

"Oh, well—let us hope and believe that he will not see you; London is a large place, and an encounter is highly improbable. Anyhow, we need not make ourselves unhappy and spoil our enjoyment by imaginary troubles."

No more, therefore, was said, but Sophy continued to be secretly a little uneasy. She had been silly enough to make an enemy of her husband's brother soon after her marriage by persistent rudeness to him, and she knew that he would be only too glad to pay her back by getting hold of something definite against her.

For the first time she almost wished she had

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told Bill, and trusted to her own wit and influence to gain his consent to the jaunt up to town.

For, after all, as she repeated to herself emphatically and decidedly, there was no earthly harm in this visit—she had done nothing wrong or discreditable. She had no intention of doing anything wrong; she only wanted a ‘bit of fun,’ a ‘lark,’ a little excitement, with a spice of danger thrown in. Who could blame her?—a lively young woman tied to an old husband—that she wanted occasionally to enjoy herself a little bit! It was very bad luck certainly that Moreton Wishaw should happen to be in town, but perhaps he was only passing through on his way to his home in Warwickshire, and probably, as Trafford said, he would not know she was in London.

So she hoped for the best, and dismissed the subject from her mind.

On the following day, however, a very unfortunate thing happened; Marvie, who had struggled with a sick headache all day, was so completely prostrated by it towards six o'clock in the afternoon, that she was unable to hold up against it any longer. She was obliged to go to bed.

What followed was rather a sordid nightmare, which Sophy could never afterwards look back upon without disgust and shuddering. A *tête-à-tête* dinner in a public room, during which little was spoken on either side, whilst glances of apprehension were cast towards the door every time a fresh party came into the room, and neither of the two enjoyed themselves in the very least. But, as

they said to each other, Moreton Wishaw was not at all the kind of man who dines at restaurants. So they took heart of grace and went on to the box at the Empire which Trafford had secured early in the day.

Now the Empire happened to be one of the places to which Sir William Wishaw had always refused to take his wife; that, of course, was the very particular reason why she had, of all things, wanted to go there.

Bill Wishaw was old-fashioned in his notions—Sophy called him ridiculous—but the fact remained that he disapproved of ladies going to music halls. His mother had been content with the theater and the opera, and the concert hall, and he could not see why his wife should want anything more. Music halls, in his opinion, were low, vulgar places, in which a refined, well-bred lady had no business to be seen. The songs and the dancing were unseemly for her eyes and ears; the atmosphere of smoke degrading to the sweetness which should encompass her. He had put his foot down with unwonted decision, and had forbidden his wife to go to them. Sophy had, of course, disobeyed him more than once—she would not have been Sophy had she not managed to do so—and hitherto her disobedience had remained undiscovered. To-night, however, her good luck deserted her, and retribution fell upon her.

They were coming away. Some presentiment of evil haunted her—she would not stop to see the end of the ballet. With her hand upon Claude

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Trafford's arm, they were making their way towards the entrance along the passage that wound round the back of the boxes, when suddenly, without word or warning, they came face to face with Moreton Wishaw.

Now Moreton was not nearly so good a chap as his elder brother. He was narrow-minded and suspicious, and he was married to a sour-faced but respectable lady, who had imbued him strongly with her own ill-natured and uncharitable nature. She hated Sophy because of her youth and prettiness, she had always believed the worst of her, and prophesied an evil end for her; so she never lost any opportunity of pouring into her husband's too willing ears every story she could hear of her flightiness and fastness; and, unfortunately, Sophy did much to give color to the bad character affixed upon her.

When Moreton came upon Sophy in the gallery of the Empire, he first of all stared at her as though he saw a ghost; and then, with an eloquent uplifting of his hands in horror, passed on in speechless condemnation of her conduct.

Lady Wishaw dropped her companion's arm and rushed back after her brother-in-law.

"Moreton! Moreton!" she cried, breathlessly, "don't you see me?"

"Of course I see you, Sophy; I wish I did not—for I am horrified; my brother is indeed to be pitied!"

"What rubbish! why?"

"*Alone—with a man—at the Empire!*"

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"The withering condemnation of words and tone could not be surpassed. Sophy could not help laughing, which was a pity, because her laugh angered her brother-in-law still more.

"You may laugh now—perhaps you will not laugh when your husband——"

"Oh, come, Moreton, you are not going to make mischief, I hope, between Bill and me?"

"I must do my duty and tell him the facts."

"But you don't know the facts," cried Sophy; "the facts are, that your cousin, Marvel Mathurin, who is staying with me in London, was taken ill just before we started."

Mr. Wishaw uttered an "Oh—h" of disbelief.

"That is perfectly true, Mr. Wishaw," here said Trafford, who had come up to the rescue. "I had offered to escort these ladies to a theater, and it was by my own mistake that I had taken a box here instead of at the Lyceum, where they wished to go, and Lady Wishaw's cousin was taken ill at the last moment; if I have done wrong in bringing her by herself, I regret it deeply, and I shall make a full explanation to Sir William of the circumstances."

"I don't wish to listen to your excuses, Trafford; pray say no more, I know my duty," and turning from them abruptly, Moreton Wishaw left the unfortunate pair staring in black consternation at one another.

For once Sophy was thoroughly frightened. She sat in trembling silence in the hansom during the drive back to Half-Moon Street, and

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could not utter a word in reply to the somewhat unsuccessful attempts which her companion made to reassure and cheer her.

"I must think it out before I can say anything," she remarked, as the hansom stopped at the door. Trafford followed her into the house in silence. Meanwhile Moreton Wishaw had performed his 'duty.'

He had done exactly what Sophy had foretold that he would do.

A telegram flashed up to Scotland that very night bearing these fateful words—"Sophy in London Empire with man. Moreton."

CHAPTER VII.

THE ONLY WAY.

SOPHY would not have been Sophy if a thousand elaborate and intricate schemes had not begun immediately to flash through her head. It was not the first time that she had been, as she called it, in a tight place, and she had never failed hitherto to extricate herself from such a position with flying colors, at moments where a less resourceful woman would have been hopelessly cornered. That her devices were not always strictly honest or straightforward goes, of course, without saying; but where either her own amusement or safety were concerned, Lady Wishaw's principles were elastic—nor did she ever hesitate to sacrifice any one else to her own advantage.

"Give me a whisky and soda first, and let me think a little," she said to Trafford, when they turned in together at the dining-room door in Half-Moon Street.

Trafford, who had let himself in with his latch-key, rang the bell for his housekeeper, who quickly brought in the tumblers and the bottles. Trafford poured out a good stiff one for his guest and another for himself, and sat down opposite her.

He did not care for her much ; such men as Claude Trafford have not, perhaps, the power to care much for any one, but she had been a good friend to him, and her house was a nice one to stay in, and, moreover, he had a deep respect for her cleverness. Such brains as she was possessed of were of the sort that appealed to him—*savoir faire*, a ready comprehension, mother wit, were all hers, and he knew that she was the last woman to sit down hopelessly under misfortune or misadventure.

So with some calmness he watched her and waited for the plan, which, from her knitted brow and abstracted eyes, he could see was already fermenting in her brain. And then at last she told him what it was.

For the first few moments he was aghast.

"But, my dear girl, surely you remember that I can't—that is impossible !" he cried in consternation.

"Of course I remember it. What does that matter. Nobody knows it but myself."

"I could not altogether say that," he began, dubiously.

"Well, nobody that knows Bill's family knows, nor does Bill himself."

"Certainly not. But——"

"Wait. I know what you are going to say, but of course, it will never come to a question of carrying the thing through ; after a little while, when the danger is over, you will have to get out of it."

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Trafford flushed a little. "That will be rather difficult, won't it?"

"Not at all. These things are done every day. Besides which, all that is beside the question. Look here, my dear fellow, do you, or do you not, want to figure as a Co. in a certain court?"

"God forbid!"

"Exactly. My views are yours. I like you very much, Claude; you are a very nice pal, but you are not quite worth Fairfield Hall and eight thousand a year, to say nothing of the Wishaw diamonds; you can't candidly say that you are, can you?"

Trafford reached a pipe from the mantelpiece, filled it deliberately and lit it. He drew a few whiffs of it before he answered, and his reply was a little resentful in tone. The thing might be true enough, but it wasn't pleasant to be told so in so many words by a pretty woman, who had hitherto declared herself to be devoted to him. But there is devotion—and devotion!

"Of course," he answered, slowly, "I am not such a fool as to say or to believe anything of the kind. All I wish to remark is that your methods of salvation are, at the first blush, somewhat unpalatable to me."

"What! to make love to a fresh woman?"

"No—to throw her over like a cad."

"Oh, that, of course, you can take your time about, and the deed can doubtless be done in some wholly painless fashion of your own devising. You need no directions as to the easiest way of

managing a woman—or of getting rid of her!—besides—she may refuse you.”

Trafford smiled. And the smile that was not directed at herself, but at the end of his own pipe, enraged her.

“You are always so sure of your own attractions,” she began, angrily; “but, don’t let us quarrel, pray! the situation is far too serious.”

He lowered his pipe, and looked at her gravely.

“You are quite right, Sophy. And if you are sure that this plan of yours is the only thing to do—well, of course, it must be done.” He held out his hand in token of acquiescence and trust, and she placed her own in it.

For the next half-hour they elaborated details.

When at last Lady Wishaw sought her room—a large double-bedded room which she shared with Marvie—she felt quite at ease and comparatively happy.

Marvie lifted her dark head from the pillows as she entered. “How late you are, Sophy!”

“Oh, I’ve been sitting up jawing with Claude. How are you, darling? Is your poor head better?” and Sophy bent affectionately over the bed. Marvie put out an arm and drew her friend’s pretty touzled head down and kissed her.

“Oh, I’m ever so much better! Have you had a nice evening?”

“So-so; we missed you so dreadfully, dearest; Claude was quite glum, his spirits were at zero.”

“What had you done to the poor man?” laughed Marvie, “had you been unkind to him?”

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"Oh, it had nothing to do with *me*, I assure you; he talked of you incessantly."

"Of *me*?" Marvie sat bolt upright in the bed. "My dear Sophy, you must be romancing!"

"Not I! you naughty little poacher! you have taken my young man right away from me—I'm nowhere now!"

Marvie stared at her in amazement, but Sophy was laughing—there was neither resentment nor anger in her merry eyes. The shock of this revelation cured every remaining vestige of Marvie's headache. What miracle had happened!

Then slowly her color rose, and a queer sense of excitement sent a sudden warmth through her veins. Was it possible? or was Sophy making fun of her?

"My dear Sophy," she remarked, with as much calmness as she could command, "you must be laboring under a delusion! I assure you I have never taken the faintest notice of Mr. Trafford."

"That is no doubt the reason he has begun to take notice of you," laughed Lady Wishaw; "there is no surer way to attract a certain stamp of man than to take no notice of him."

"But—surely—you, you are—rather fond of him yourself, aren't you?" stammered Marvie.

"I, my dear! Oh, only in the usual platonic affection way—just *pour passer le temps*, you know."

"Is that all?"

"Absolutely. Claude and I are old friends,

nothing more ; he always confides his *amourettes* to me, but, if I'm not very much mistaken, *this* is considerably more serious."

"My dear Sophy, what nonsense !"

"Oh, you may call it nonsense, Marvie, but you seem to forget that you are a very handsome girl, and Claude wasn't born blind."

That was what Trafford had himself said to her !

"Go to bed, you foolish woman," was all Marvie's reply, "and allow me, please, to go to sleep."

"Well, you'll see if I'm not right one of these days," retorted Lady Wishaw.

But long after Sophy was snoring the deep snores of an untroubled conscience, Marvie lay wide awake by her side, cudgeling her brains over the extraordinary somersault which seemed to have taken place during her enforced temporary absence from the stage of the proceedings, and a chaos of contradictory thoughts and feelings revolved themselves bewilderingly through her mind.

Secret delight, flattered vanity, the exultation of triumph ; these came uppermost, but there was a substratum, too, of a less satisfactory nature—a vague sense of uneasiness, not unmixed with actual fear ; a few very genuine doubts, coupled with an ineradicable germ of suspicion, and then, last of all, but by no means least, a name—*Ray* !

Marvie had a horrible conviction that to be glad because Claude Trafford was becoming in-

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terested in her was to be guilty of treachery to Ray.

Yet what folly ! There was absolutely nothing between Ray and herself ; he was just her dear cousin and playfellow, the companion of her life, who had teased and chaffed and scolded her ever since she could remember anything ; Ray, who had all her faults and imperfections at his finger ends, who knew her almost better than she knew herself, but who had never, never, never spoken a single word of love to her in his whole life !

How in the world was Ray mixed up with this new development of her life !

And yet—and yet—why did Ray's curly head and honest blue eyes get between her and that other image that would come so riotously and persistently into her agitated and broken dreams, dispelling, effectually, that calm and equable course of her maiden meditations ! Morning light brought no elucidation of the mystery ; what it did bring was a hurried packing up and setting forth for the station.

Sophy decreed that they were to go home by the ten o'clock train. Marvie could not see the necessity of such haste. She had some unfinished shopping to do ; she pleaded for the afternoon, or, at least, the mid-day train.

"Where's the hurry ? Bill doesn't come back till to-morrow—why should we be so rushed ?"

But Sophy was adamant. She must get home, she said. She was expecting a large party for

Sunday ; she had domestic arrangements to make. Marvie suggested the uses of a housekeeper. Sophy retorted that housekeepers were usually fools if left entirely to their own devices ; and, in conclusion, she brought forth a further reason for haste.

“ Besides which, I am not at all certain that Bill may not come back to-night—it’s quite on the cards.”

Marvie perceived that the pith of the argument lay in its tail ; and, furthermore, she opined that Sophy must have some sources of knowledge on the subject of her husband’s return from Scotland which she had not seen fit to divulge to herself.

She submitted to the inevitable. But distinctly she was disappointed, all the more because it soon transpired that Trafford had received orders not to accompany them back to Fairfield Hall. He was to follow on the Saturday, coming down by the same train as the rest of the invited guests.

Marvie had had a not unnatural curiosity to observe him under the new conditions that had been brought to her notice. She wanted to see whether his manner or his speech to herself would, in any way, be altered since yesterday. As things were, her observations were necessarily very much curtailed.

Breakfast was a hurried meal ; they bolted their eggs and bacon with one eye on the clock, and swallowed gulps of scalding coffee, whilst the luggage was being put upon the cab. There was

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certainly no opportunity for lover-like amenities on the part of their host. Marvie thought he looked rather sulky, but possibly that might be owing to his disappointment at the hasty departure of his guests.

Once, however, something new in his aspect did strike her. Looking up suddenly between two mouthfuls of marmalade, she found Trafford's eyes fixed, with much intensity, upon herself. It was not by any means the ardent gaze of a lover, yet it was a very disconcerting gaze—it was earnest and concentrated; there was certainly no rapture of delight in his eyes, but rather the keen interest of the careful critic. An odd thing happened too—odd and unusual. When their eyes met with that sudden magnetism with which eyes that have thoughts behind them are prone to meet, it was Trafford, not Marvie, who blushed, vividly and guiltily. This struck Marvie as strange, and she turned a little pale herself as the result of the strangeness of it. It went through her mind to reflect that, although it might be delightful to be wooed by Claude Trafford, yet the delight would assuredly be tempered by terror. There was a suggestion of force about him. One might not be a free agent; one might be compelled to do and to say things one did not desire really to say and do; it might even resolve itself into a species of hypnotism. Bah! what folly! Marvie pushed back her plate half empty and rose hastily from the table.

“I must go and put on my hat,” she said;

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"we have only five minutes more. Please excuse me."

Trafford opened the door for her and went back to the table. Lady Wishaw sat still; she had come down with her hat on. There was the wisdom of the serpent in her, and the prevision of an Insurance Office. "If you look so appallingly cross, my dear fellow, you will spoil the whole show!" she remarked.

"You have said something to her, then?"

"Of course I have. I have paved the way."

He threw up his hands. "Good God!" he ejaculated.

Sophy began to laugh. "You are really very funny," she said, mockingly; "especially are you funny to those who know the sort of man you are! We are on the brink of a precipice, you and I, *you* principally; and yet, somehow, you give me the idea that you object to catching hold of an exceedingly serviceable rope-end from motives of—delicacy," and again she laughed softly and charmingly. She was standing up now, pinning on her veil before the glass over the mantelpiece.

"Upon my soul, it seems a d——d shame!" The words made her start round and face him.

"Are you thinking of *me*, pray? or of *her*?" she asked, ragefully.

Trafford's eyes dropped beneath the fire of hers.

"Oh," he remarked, awkwardly, "of you, my dear, of course—of *you*!"

But Lady Wishaw knew that was a lie. There

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was no time for more—Marvie's step was on the stairs outside.

Lady Wishaw composed her countenance into an amiable, if somewhat inscrutable, smile.

"Then do as I tell you, my dear fellow," she said, hurriedly, in a lowered voice. Then the door opened and Marvie came in.

Confidences were at an end.

CHAPTER VIII.

‘A CLEVER LITTLE WOMAN.’

“I FEEL,” said Lady Wishaw, as the brougham which had been sent to meet the two ladies drove rapidly up the avenue towards the house, “I feel a premonitory instinct, amounting in point of fact, to a positive presentiment, that Bill will be home in time for dinner to-night!”

“But you did not expect him till to-morrow, I thought? Have you heard from him?”

“No. But there is an instinct *here*,” and Sophy struck her chest. “These inward feelings are not uncommon, you know, in the relations between husband and wife. You will find it out yourself some day, dearest.”

“Oh! That is why, then, you hurried us back from London?”

Sophy nodded. “You see, dear,” she said, with a gravity which did her credit, “I must be on the doorstep to receive him! A man likes to feel himself welcomed home by his wife.”

“Oh,” said Marvie, slowly, “I begin, I think, to understand.”

But she only partially understood. Lady Wishaw carried out her programme to the letter. Moreover, her instincts were true. A telegram

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to the coachman during the course of the afternoon announced Sir William's arrival at the station at seven-thirty.

Dinner—with all his favorite dishes—was postponed to eight-thirty, and the carriage was ordered to meet him at the given hour.

Sophy stood smiling on the threshold to receive her spouse as he entered the house. He cast at her a glance full of doubt and suspicion, and, without a word of reply to her welcome, began pulling off his traveling ulster. Sophy made feeble dabs at the collar by way of assisting in the operation.

"My darling!" she said very loud, so that all the servants standing about might hear; "how cold and tired you must be after your long journey; how glad I am to see you safe back!"

Bill Wishaw grunted something inaudible.

"I want to speak to you at once," he said, in a lowered voice, "immediately."

"Certainly; let us come into your study, there is a good fire; I was afraid you might be cold."

She proceeded him into the room, which opened out of the hall, and he followed her and closed the door behind him.

"Who have you got in the house?" he asked, gruffly.

Lady Wishaw's pretty blue eyes opened widely, and her eyebrows went up.

"In the house?—why, Marvie is here."

"Who else?"

"Nobody at all."

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“Where is your aunt Isabella?”

“Poor darling, she had an attack of her nerves; she could not come on Wednesday; she is coming down to-morrow with the rest.”

Sir William was looking at her fixedly. He admired her very much, and he loved her; he was not of a jealous or suspicious nature; he trusted her in every way—only, he did hate to be deceived and disobeyed. But the clear blue eyes looked up frankly at him, her rosy lips smiled; she looked so very glad to see him. Oh, it was impossible, quite impossible, that she could have done anything she was ashamed of!

His aspect grew less ferocious as he proceeded to put to her a question that was rather in the nature of an assertion.

“Sophy, you have been up to London?”

Lady Wishaw laughed merrily.

“Yes, I am coming to that, Bill! it’s what I am going to tell you about; we had a great excitement, Marvie and I.”

“Oh, Marvie went?”

“Certainly Marvie went! should I have gone alone? It was, in fact, entirely on Marvie’s account I went at all.”

Sir William threw himself down into an arm-chair. “I don’t understand,” he murmured. Sophy perched herself, bird-like, on the arm of his chair, and began twirling the end of his gray moustache.

“You *shall* understand in second, dear old goose! When Aunt Isabella couldn’t come, I

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thought Mr. Trafford ought to go away after what you had said, you know, and I told him so."

"Ah—h!" There was a breath of relief in the ejaculation. "You told—Trafford—what I had said?"

"Well, no, not word for word! It would have been rather rude, you know; but I said enough to show him—well—that perhaps a little run up to town would be more amusing for him than stopping on here alone with only us two women. He took my hint entirely."

"But—you were *seen*, Sophy—*seen*, at all places on earth—at the Empire!"

"I'm coming to that; give me time. Well, as I was just going to tell you, Mr. Trafford then made a sudden suggestion—that Marvie and I should run up to London, too, for a night, dine with him, and go to a play; it was all got up in a minute. Somehow, I had said yes before I knew where I was; and Marvie did so beg and beseech me; it was just a little jaunt, you see, dear old man, and there was no earthly harm in it—was there? and I had no time to ask your leave."

"Yes—I see," and Bill's arm stole round his wife's little waist, "but did you not remember that I do not care for you to be alone with Trafford? I don't want your name coupled with his; and that's just what has happened—and at the Emp——"

She laid her hand on his mouth.

"Don't interrupt, and have patience, please.

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Something happened before we left home that seemed to me to make everything quite different. Mr. Trafford told me something, and in that something lies the great excitement of all ! What do you think ? But you’ll never guess, so I must tell you ; Claude Trafford has fallen head over ears in love with Marvie ! ”

“ With Marvie !—why, he had only known her two days. ”

“ Yes, but that makes no difference to some men. Mr. Trafford is impetuous ; *you* were, if you remember, darling. Why, you fell headlong the first time you set eyes on me ; you’ve often told me so. Do you recollect ; at that tennis party ? where I wore a white and blue striped muslin. ”

“ Well, yes—so I did, you monkey ; but go on—go on. ”

“ Well, of course when poor Mr. Trafford came and poured out his heart to me, and begged and prayed me to help him and give him a chance of getting on with her, and when Marvie herself wanted to go, why, I really hadn’t the strength of mind to refuse. ”

“ I see—I see ; but how about the Empire ? ”

“ Well, that was the terrible bit of bad luck ! Poor Marvie got one of her dreadful sick headaches ; perhaps it was the railway journey or the excitement. She just managed to dine—we dined with Mr. Trafford at the Berkeley Restaurant—quite a quiet respectable place—but after dinner she gave in altogether. I had to take her back to

—to the lodgings, and she went to bed, and then poor Mr. Trafford was dreadfully disappointed and miserable, I really could not do less than go on with him to the place—”

“But why the Empire?—when you know I object to music halls.”

“But Mr. Trafford did not know it; and I did ask him to take stalls at the Lyceum; I did so want to see dear Irving in Hamlet!—but, alas, he could not get places, the house was so crammed full in every corner! So he just ran into the Empire without coming back to consult us, and took a box there. And that was how I came to be there, my dear old Bill, and how your dear brother Moreton came to see me, and went on to try and make mischief between husband and wife; and how my darling old man came to be so nasty and cruel as to believe his horrid old brother, instead of trusting his own poor little wifey.”

Whereupon Sir William took his spouse into his arms and kissed her fondly, and begged her to forgive him for ever having doubted for a moment that she was the best and dearest and most dutiful of wives.

“And where is the ardent lover?” he inquired a few minutes later, as they went up-stairs together to dress for dinner, his arm fondly wound about her, and her head rubbing up against his shoulder, “is he not coming back to woo his Marvie?”

“Oh, of course, certainly, he is coming to-morrow. But you mustn’t say a word, Bill;

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what I have told you is in confidence, remember ; and, of course, not a word to Marvie ; girls are so shy, and she might be scared. I want it to dawn upon her by degrees—little by little ; I shall do all I can to help things on, you may be sure of that ! ”

“ Clever little woman ! ”

“ Yes,” said Lady Wishaw to herself, when five minutes later, she found herself alone in her own room, and drew a long sigh of relief as she closed the door upon herself ; “ and I do think I may say *that* of myself with some justice and truth. I *am* ‘ a clever little woman,’ indeed ! ”

CHAPTER IX.

A NEW INFLUENCE.

MARVIE had not been back many days from her visit to the Wishaws before her young stepmother became aware that that visit had, in some indescribable way, worked a great change in her.

Edna was by nature and habit a close observer of character, and Marvie's character was one which it had been from the first a special interest to her to observe. In many ways she had believed that she already understood the proud defiant girl, who, to foster an imaginary grievance, had kept up a bitter, but perfectly groundless, resentment against herself. Edna, although she deplored it, had been perfectly able to make allowances for Marvie's attitude. It *was*, no doubt, hard on a grown-up young woman to find a stepmother two years younger than herself suddenly put over herself as the head of her father's house. Edna was only too much alive to the discrepancies of her position, and was just enough to feel that every excuse for the girl's sullen and irreconcilable attitude ought to be made for her.

But here she was met by something new. Some outside influence seemed to be now at work. Marvie was not, indeed, one whit softened towards

herself, and yet she was evidently no longer absorbed in that constant effort to ignore her father's wife which had been her distinguishing characteristic up to the date of her visit to Fairfield Hall.

Mrs. Mathurin felt that she no longer occupied Marvie's thoughts to the exclusion of all others. Marvie's beautiful eyes, if they were still averted from herself, were no longer filled with cold disdain. They were full of dream problems suggested by her own thoughts—thoughts that seemed far away from the little daily rubs and disquietudes of the life about her. Sometimes those dark eyes seemed to be almost tender in their thoughtful absorption; generally they were speculative and far away. She was evidently preoccupied. Sometimes one had to speak more than once to her to attract her attention, and then she came back to the practical things that surrounded her with a flush and a start. There were days when she looked pale and despondent, other days—and these more rare—when she appeared radiant and full of some secret cause of happiness; and there were some days, also, when a gnawing anxiety seemed to be devouring her, when her lips were white, and when quick little frowns contracted her brows. All this portended some unusual excitement, partly of pleasure, but partly, also, of pain. Her father, who had eyes for no one but his wife and his baby son, and his budding roses, noticed nothing—neither would Lady Lareston have remarked the change in

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her granddaughter had not Marvie lost her appetite.

That did attract her attention. Lady Lareston had an irritating way of abrogating to herself the duties of hostess at the table. Edna had schooled herself from the first to put up with this very trivial matter, knowing that it signified but little, and that no doubt "granny" found it hard to alter the habits of a residence of many years in her son-in-law's house. It was one of the many pin-pricks the new wife had to endure at the hands of her husband's family.

The old lady used to order the servants about, send messages about this or that dish to the cook, and generally comport herself as though the culinary arrangements were entirely dependent upon herself, which—as Edna had at her husband's express desire taken over the housekeeping into her own hands from the very day of her arrival—was sufficiently irritating both to her nerves and her temper. Both, luckily, were well under young Mrs. Mathurin's control.

It did, however, make her get rather hot to hear Lady Lareston doing the honors to any chance guest who happened to be dining or lunching.

"Have some more mutton, Mr. So-and-so?" she would say, graciously, "or another rissole? James, bring back the rissoles;—and what are you drinking? are you sure you like claret? it's only light claret, you know. Do have some Hock, won't you?" and so on. Or if they were alone, it would be—"Really, cook is getting quite

reckless with her spices and her flavorings ; everything is too rich ; I must tell her to be more careful with her sauces."

Arthur would, perhaps, glance uncomfortably at his wife—dreading a collision, possibly—but Edna would sit silent, and a slightly heightened color would be the only sign of annoyance she would display. Edna was too wise a woman to give battle over such trifles, however irritating, and, indeed, almost insulting they might be.

And Arthur Mathurin would bless her in his heart for her dignified self-control, and congratulate himself afresh upon the wisdom of his choice. A household of squabbling women would have been insufferable to him, but his little wife, if she had not the blue blood in her veins of a Countess of Lareston, was, at least, too true a lady to enter into vulgar disputes as to her rights or her privileges with an old lady, who, both from her age and her breeding, ought certainly to have had better manners. But it takes two to make a quarrel, and Edna was one of those wise people who never care to stoop to pick up a flung-down gauntlet. She was strong enough to despise such unworthy methods.

But to return to Marvie. Marvie's usually healthy appetite failed her, and her grandmother became distressedly alive to the fact.

"You are eating nothing, my darling," she cried, one evening at dinner, "and last night it was the same—do have some chicken."

"No, thanks, granny, I am not hungry."

"But you ate nothing to speak of at lunch, I noticed; James, bring back those cutlets for Miss Mathurin—no? oh, I'm afraid they are too under-done for you. We seem to get nothing properly cooked now," with a resentful glance at Edna, who kept her eyes upon her own plate; "you want nice little dishes to tempt your appetite, my sweet one. I shall speak to cook myself to-morrow."

"Dearest granny, I really don't care what I eat," said Marvie, listlessly; "I'm not very hungry to-day—the—the weather is enervating—these first warm days are trying."

"Yes, and the food should be more tempting," continued the old lady, viciously.

The master of the house here cut in. "I don't see how Marvie or anyone else can want better food, granny," he said, cheerfully. "These cutlets are done to perfection, and the dinner is as well cooked as it is well chosen—my house-keeper," he added, looking fondly across the table at his wife, "understands her business excellently well. If Marvie is not inclined to eat, it is her own fault. Why don't you ride, my girl, and get more exercise? that is what you want to give you a better appetite."

"I went for a long bicycle ride to-day, papa," replied Marvie; "I came in quite tired."

"Yes, I saw you, my dear; you came in looking white and dead-beat. What's the use of wearing yourself out on a bicycle? that does you no good. There's your horse to ride, and your pony cart to drive; give up that stupid bicycling that

does women more harm than good, and put on your habit and go for a good gallop over the downs."

The conversation devolved into a disquisition on the merits and demerits of divers forms of exercise, and Marvie's lack of appetite was passed over.

But on the following Saturday Ray came down for the week-end—Ray, full of new hopes and dreams for the future, eager to begin his authorized wooing, and as keen as he could be to see once again his beloved Marvie, from whom he had now been separated for some weeks. And that which may be hidden from a father's eyes cannot, by any possibility, be concealed from the eyes of a lover.

Before dinner was half over on Saturday evening, Ray had discovered not only that Marvie had lost her appetite, but that she had also lost a great many other things that constituted the one and only Marvie Mathurin on earth.

"Come and have a game a billiards," he said to her, after dinner, as soon as he could manage to escape the post-prandial 'shop' in which his uncle was prone to indulge for the benefit and instruction of his nephew.

Marvie rose rather listlessly from her chair, flung aside the novel over which she had been poring for some time without ever turning a page of it, and followed her cousin into the billiard-room, where, after a few preliminary strokes of a very one-sided game, Ray suddenly turned on her and attacked her.

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"That's the second easy stroke you've missed ; what's upset your apple-cart to-night, Marvie ?"

"Dear boy, what vulgar expressions you do use !"

"That's no answer. What's wrong with you ?"

"Do get out of the light and let me make this cannon."

Ray got out of the light, but Marvie did not make her cannon.

"My eye is out to-night," she murmured, apologetically.

"Your eye, is it ; are you sure it isn't your temper, Miss Mathurin ?—or—or—are you *ill*, Marvie ?" he added, with a sudden change of voice and manner.

Marvie laughed, but the laugh was a little harsh.

"Am I ever ill ?" she retorted. "How solemn you look, Ray."

"Then what on earth is the matter ?"

"Nothing !"

"What a woman's answer !"

"What should be the matter, pray ?"

"That is exactly what I want to be told. You eat nothing ; you hardly answer when you are spoken to ; you seem to be thinking of something a long way off. Worse than all, I made two distinctly good jokes at dinner-time, and you did not see either of them ; and you even let slip a chance of having your knife into your unfortunate little stepmother ; in short, my dear, there is something wrong with you ! You are not yourself !"

"You are really extraordinarily clever, Ray," replied Marvie, scornfully, and then she leant forward across the table and made a careful stroke off the side of the cushion on to the red ball.

"Now you have distinguished yourself by playing with my ball instead of your own," said Ray. "Look here, Marvie, you may sneer at me as much as you like, but you can't hide things from me. I know you too well—all these long years you and I have been together."

"Like brother and sister," interpolated Marvie, softly.

"Not in the least like brother and sister," snapped Ray, quite crossly, so that Marvie could not help laughing.

"Ah, that's better! Do you know that is the first time you've really laughed since I came? I won't press the point of relationship just now, but what I meant to say was, that you and I have been too much to each other in the past for concealments. Now you are hiding something from me, Marvie. Either you are ill, or you are unhappy."

"Unhappy! what a joke!"

"Very well, then; you have got something on your conscience."

"Murder, no doubt," said Marvie, airily.

"Oh, well, you might be meditating the murder of that blessed baby, you know."

"Horrid little beast!"

"There you are, you see; that's evidence. If I'm asked in court whether you ever said anything

to lead me to suppose that you entertained feelings of hatred towards your infant brother, I can quote 'Horrid little beast!' as a proof of your enmity towards him."

"Don't be so silly!"

"Then it's something else. I wonder what that hateful little Wishaw woman has been putting you up to, by the way?"

Marvie crimsoned up to the very roots of her hair, and Ray perceived that his stray shot had gone home.

"Oh—it *is* Lady Wishaw, then!" he said, slowly, looking at his cousin fixedly.

"Lady Wishaw is my friend, Ray. I desire that you say nothing against her," said Marvie, haughtily, and, as she brandished her cue defiantly, she looked positively aggressive.

"She is the very worst friend on earth for you, Marvie!" cried Ray, warmly, "a conceited, reckless little flirt, always doing risky things and getting herself talked about! She sails just about as near the wind as she can, I hear; and if I had my way with you, she should be no friend of yours any longer."

"But then you haven't your way with me—and what is more, you never will have your way with me," cried Marvie, furiously, in downright earnest at last. And therewith she flung down her cue upon the ground with a clatter, and flounced out of the room and fled up the stairs to her bedroom, where the loud slamming of the door told all who might hear it that temper had at last got the better

of her. Nor did any one in the house see her again that evening.

Ray smoked a cigar and knocked the balls aimlessly about the table for the next half-hour, with the pleasing reflection in his mind that he had certainly not done much that evening to further his wooing.

But the next morning he sought out young Mrs. Mathurin. He found her in the library, sitting in a low chair by the window with little Jack on her lap. The nurse had apparently left the child to his mother's care. Ray thought she made a very pretty picture as she sat there. He stood for a moment in the doorway to look at her. The sun came streaming through the window upon the two heads so close together. Edna's gossamer hair was like a sun-riven mist about her brow, whilst the head of the child was covered with dark glossy curls. The boy, indeed, was handsomer than his mother, for he had inherited some of his father's good looks; nevertheless, he had his mother's eyes, those eyes that Ray had termed—electric.

"Come in, Ray, come in," said Mrs. Mathurin, seeing that he paused upon the threshold. "You don't mind Jacky, do you? Nurse has left him with me for a few minutes."

"I don't mind him at all; in fact, I like him," replied Ray. "How the young shaver grows!"

Jack burst out into delighted cooings and whoopings at the sight of his big cousin, but for

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once Ray took little notice of him. He sat down opposite Edna.

"Look here," he began, slowly, "there is something amiss——"

"With Marvie; yes, I know," she broke in, quickly. "I knew you would say so."

"Ah! you have noticed it, then?"

"Well, of course. It isn't difficult to notice, is it?"

"What is the matter with her?"

Edna shrugged her shoulders a little, and laid her cheek on the top of the child's dark head.

"Is she ill?" he asked.

"Oh, no."

"Unhappy?—or, have you two had a row?"

"You know I never have 'rows,' as you call them, with any one," she replied, evasively.

"Do you know what is wrong?" he persisted.

"No, I do not."

"Do you guess, then?"

She was silent. He waited a minute or two, and then she heard him sigh.

"I wish you would help me, Mrs. Mathurin."

"My dear boy, I will do anything in the world for you, but—but—will you take advice?"

She turned her clear gray eyes full upon him; there was a little quizzical look in them. Advice, as she well knew, is not often very welcome.

But Ray answered her very earnestly. "I will take your advice thankfully. You know, of course, that—that Marvie is all the world to me"—his voice broke a little as he said the words.

Edna nodded. "I want, you know, to win her ; but she is not to be easily won, and I have begun by quarreling with her. We always quarrel, you know, more or less ; but this one is rather more, and she seems so odd—so altered. Have I offended her in any way lately, do you suppose ? She is such a queer girl ; one is never sure about her. What do you advise me to do ?"

"Do nothing—wait. This is a phase, I believe ; it will not last. Go away and let her alone—the thing will blow over."

Ray was thoughtful. "Then," he said, after a minute or two, "I see that you agree with me. It is some outside influence that is at work."

Edna's little pale-tinted face flushed suddenly scarlet.

"You mean—you think——?" she stammered.

"I mean that Lady Wishaw has been up to some of her usual games again," replied Ray, savagely. "She is the very worst friend on earth that Marvie ever had."

"Oh!—oh!—you were thinking of Lady Wishaw, then?"

"Why, yes," and Ray looked at her with a little surprise. "Weren't you thinking of her too? Who on earth *were* you thinking about, if it was not of her?"

But Edna shook her head, and looked away out of the window again.

"Oh, nobody at all, of course."

And more than that she could not be got to

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say. But after he was gone she smiled a little as she said to herself, "What blind bats most men are, to be sure!" She had, however, promised to befriend him.

CHAPTER X.

CLEAVE MANOR.

A GOOD twelve miles from Western Lodge on one side, and about as far off on the other from Fairfield Hall, stands, a little back from the main road, an old Elizabethan Manor House, fast falling into disrepair. It had been for many long years in the market, and, owing to its picturesque appearance and architectural interest, as well as to the great natural beauty of its large gardens and pleasure grounds, would no doubt have been sold long ago, but for the unfortunate fact that there is a flaw in the title which not all the skill and wisdom of the law has been as yet able to evade or to remove. This defect has over and over again stood in the way of would-be purchasers until time has added to it a second drawback, very nearly as insuperable as the first, in the fact that, owing to long neglect, it is fast tumbling into ruins, and that to make the old house habitable or even weatherproof now, it would be almost necessary to pull it down and rebuild it altogether, and that, as everybody agrees, would be sheer desecration.

So year after year Cleave Manor remains empty and untenanted, save for the rats that

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scuttle across the rotting boards, and the bats that have flown in for shelter through the broken window-panes; and year after year the thickening arms of its surrounding yews and hollies press closer and thicker about it, and the ivy climbs unpruned from up the walls to the topmost chimney and turret, and the once lovely gardens have become a desolate wilderness of weed and of briar. The country people are afraid to go near it by night, for lights are said to have been seen on winter evenings in the upper windows; and some declare they have heard unearthly sounds—screams, or long wailing moans—that are wafted weirdly across the water meadows which stretch away towards the river to the south of the house. In short, Cleave Manor has acquired an evil reputation, and, save for an occasional picnic which is got up to explore its old-world beauties, it is seldom that its solitude is invaded by the foot of man.

Yet there are plenty of interesting things to see in the old house. There is a ruined chapel with a delightful fretted east window, through which a pink china rose has pushed itself in great boughs of rosy sweetness, and on whose grass-grown floor several fine monuments of dead and gone Cleaves are still intact. There is a crusader in chain armor with crossed legs, and a knight who lies between his two wives, with a stone hand clasped fondly and impartially in the hand of each; and high up on the wall there is a kneeling family of fourteen children—seven sons on

one side and seven daughters on the other, one behind the other, all in ruffs and farthingales, in the train of their parents, who are three good sizes larger than themselves. Students of church architecture come some times to see these monuments; and, on one occasion, the Archæological Society included Cleave Manor in its country tour, on purpose to make a special report of them. Then there is a dear old hall with oak paneling and a heavy oaken ceiling, and there are a few faded frescoes and some ragged tapestry left on the staircase, but the furniture was all taken away and sold before the memory of the present generation.

But the charm of the old house, after all, lies outside it—on the sunny terrace that faces the south, with the gray and crumbling stone balustrade, over which *Aimée Vibert* and *Gloire de Dijon* roses clamber in unpruned and untrammelled luxuriance; and where the grass-grown terrace path ends in a flight of broken steps. Here one looks out over a wilderness of ragged yew hedges and tangled gardens, across the green meadows beyond the sunk fence; where a trout stream, fringed with willows and yellow flags, chatters merrily on its hasty way.

Upon this charming terrace, one sweet morning of the end of May, a young woman was walking impatiently and restlessly up and down. Her bicycle—oh, modern and twentieth-century insult to the bygone ages represented by the mouldering walls with their ancient and venerable

suggestiveness !—leant pertly up against a broken gray-lichened pilaster, crowned by the fragment of what once was the infant Hercules struggling with a now headless and toothless Python. The bright nickle plate of the handle-bars glittered with an oddly contrasting brightness against the sober close fitting mantle of ivy, that had flung itself over the broken statue, imparting a mingled suggestion of Bond Street show rooms and Coventry manufactories to the hallowed atmosphere that should have been consecrated entirely to the sixteenth century ; and there was, in addition, that storm-tossed young woman, with her flashing eyes and troubled brow, ramping irritably up and down the moss-grown stone pavement that stretched its wide flags along the whole facade of the old house. Every now and then she consulted her watch, and every time her impatient feet brought her to the farther end of the terrace she stood a moment shading her eyes from the sun with her ungloved hand, to peer anxiously out along the shrubbery walk, half-choked with overgrown laurels, by which narrow avenue she herself had reached the trysting-place half-an-hour ago.

Half-an-hour late ! Marvie had never waited so long for anybody in her life before ! A dozen times she told herself that it was unpardonable—abominable—intolerable ; that she would go at once—immediately ! And then she had looked at her watch again, and had murmured, with ever-recurring weakness :

"I will give him just five minutes more, and then I will go!"

But the five minutes repeated themselves over and over again, and still Marvie waited!

At last, just as her pride was evaporating into tears of mortification and disappointment, came the long-hoped-for sound of wheels upon the soft gravel of the shrubbery drive, and in another minute a big man on a bicycle came into view under the drooping boughs of the laurels. He sprang off his machine at the sight of her, and came eagerly to meet her.

"I am afraid I am very late."

She consulted her watch. "Forty minutes. I was just going away!" She did her best to speak coldly, but he detected a thrill of tears in her voice and drew his own inferences.

"And you will never forgive me, I suppose?—eh, little spitfire?"

But there was nothing of the spitfire about the pliant figure which he straightway took into his arms—after a very feeble show of resistance on her part.

"You are very angry then, Marvie? Come, look up at me, and let me see how angry you can be!"

But there was nothing but sheer joy and rapture in the beautiful eyes which lifted themselves at his bidding.

He covered her upturned face with such passionate kisses that the blood rushed in a hot flame to her cheeks.

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"It was very rude of you to keep me waiting, all the same," she stammered.

"I couldn't get away, Sophy——"

She flung herself out of his arms impatiently.

"Oh—Sophy again! After all, I believe you like her better than you do me!"

"Silly jealous child!" he murmured, caressingly, as he drew her back forcibly to his arms; and he smiled, not ill-pleased. It was a refinement of enjoyment to him, that he could always make her jealous.

"Don't you know that I *must* go through a bit of make-believe with our dear Sophy, just to keep her in a good temper?"

"But why—why—when she told me herself that there was nothing but ordinary friendship between you—why should she require anything of you, pray?"

"Vanity, dearest—nothing but vanity! Have you not noticed that our dear little mutual friend is inordinately vain?"

Yes—Marvie knew that, certainly. She was appeased.

"But why should we waste our precious moments together, my darling, in talking about other people?" he cried. "Come, let us sit down here and forget Lady Wishaw and all other tiresome people!" He led her to a stone bench at the end of the terrace, and they sat down together. "I want you to tell me all about your dear self. Have you thought of me, Marvie, just once or twice since we last met? Do you dream of me

sometimes at night, love? Let me take off this hard-brimmed straw hat, so that you can lean your dear lovely head up against my shoulder. There, that's better, isn't it? Are you comfortable so? 'Divinely happy,' do you say? Ah, little flatterer! and what must I be, do you suppose?"

He was the most perfectly delightful lover that it was possible to imagine. A long and diversified experience had familiarized him with every subtle shade of feminine feeling. He had a veritable genius for saying exactly the right thing, for satisfying every unspoken craving, for clearing away every shadow of doubt or uneasiness; and all this not by many words or by long arguments, but just by gentle touches, as it were; by things rather implied than spoken, by little suggestions, little caresses, attentions that were never rough or heavy-handed, but always delicate and refined in character. There was, in short, so rare a flavor of tenderness about this man's wooing, that not a woman on whom he exercised his wiles had ever been able to resist him.

Making love amounted with him to a fine art, and, like all true artists, Claude Trafford took a pride and a pleasure in his own performances.

And, to do him justice, he was generally thoroughly in earnest—at the time. To consider the future or to weigh the consequences of his wooing was, perhaps, not in him; but at the moment he meant what he said, absolutely and entirely, and when he softly murmured into a pretty woman's ear that he would love her for-

ever and ever, he really felt that he was speaking the strict truth, and that it would give him the utmost pleasure to do so.

Well—at the present moment, then, he loved Marvel Mathurin, with all his heart and strength, as it seemed to him. He did not want to go and talk to her father about her, or to ask his consent or his blessing, to consider settlements and future establishments, nothing, in fact, half so crude and material as marriage and its accessories had even found its way into his mind ; all he wanted was just to do what he was doing now, to sit still in the sun with her and to kiss her to his heart's content, to feel the pressure of the dark head upon his arm, to watch the lovelight in her splendid eyes, to touch with a gentle finger the peach-bloom softness of her cheek, and to feel himself to be master of her whole impulsive, imperious personality. That he had begun to make love to her at the bidding of another woman, for the furtherance of that other woman's selfish designs, was really nothing to him at all, any more than was the fact that he had embarked on the enterprise to please Lady Wishaw, and with the distinct understanding that the whole thing was to be nothing but a short-lived farce, and that he had gone on with it in order to please himself. That he had found making love to Marvie a more delightful pastime than he had anticipated was not, he considered, his fault so much as Sophy's. She should not have set him on to the job, he told himself, unless she had been prepared to take the very

possible consequences. It was silly of her to imagine that he could play at making love to such a girl as Marvie, and not enjoy the game exceedingly. The girl had been so proud and so 'stand off' with him at first, so determined to keep him at arm's length and to treat his professions partly with bantering scorn and partly with disbelief, that he had been nettled and exasperated into feeling in earnest what at first he had only pretended to feel. He had ended by determining to conquer her, to make her feel his power, to reduce her to that state of blind love which other women had always yielded to him. And he had succeeded, just as he always did succeed. Marvie, proud, spoilt beauty as she was, who had all her life been a queen and never a slave, had fallen at last in slavish adoration into his arms. She had given her heart to him entirely and fully, with a self-surrender that was absolute; she had no longer any wishes but his, no other thought save for him, no better object in life than to be with him; she had succumbed to him, in short, almost more completely and thoroughly than many a far weaker woman would have done. For a strong nature, when it gives itself, does so, generally, without reservation.

Nevertheless, though Marvie was deeply, even desperately, in love—so much in love that she had flung every prudential consideration to the winds—there remained at the very bottom of her mind a residuum of thought and feeling which she strove in vain to crush and to smother.

That old impression, for instance—of terror—seldom left her. All Trafford's tenderness and fascination could not suffice to banish the nameless fear of him which, from the very first, had arisen in her. She scarcely knew what it was she feared or dreaded, save that in some way she felt that he had a power over her—a power that might possibly be used for evil and not for good; that if, for instance, he were to determine upon making her do anything she did not want to do; not all her resistance, however strenuous, would avail to save her from being forced into doing it. When this idea came home to her there were moments when, in spite of her love, she felt she not only feared, but even almost disliked him. These moments were but fleeting, of course, and at his first caress the impression would vanish away completely; but it was odd to her that even for a moment such thoughts could prevail with her. Something seemed to raise a warning finger; some inward voice appeared to say, "He is not safe—not to be trusted—not like Ray!" for it was always with Ray's name that these strange and unaccountable moments of distrust would somehow end. Ray was so different. But then, of course, he was an inferior being altogether to Claude Trafford!

This morning, even whilst leaning her dark head against her lover's shoulder, and sheltered within the strong circling arm with which he had surrounded her, Marvie experienced something of that terror which so often assailed her when there

was something she wanted particularly to say to him. It was, indeed, some moments before, with an oddly beating heart, she was able to open the subject.

"There was something," she began, rather awkwardly—"that I wanted so much to say to you, Claude."

"That you think me wonderfully handsome?" he replied, pinching her cheek gently between his finger and thumb. "Was that it?"

"No—no—don't laugh, Claude; it is something serious."

"I am as grave as a judge, and all attention. Say on!"

But she played with the lapel of his coat, and for a few moments no words would come.

"Well?" he said, at last.

Then suddenly she took her courage in both hands and plunged into words.

"It is only— Oh, Claude—you must guess! I do so want you to tell me—when—when—is this state of things to end?"

"To end?—and what state of things, my dear child? I don't understand."

"Oh, surely you must see that—that—I can't go on."

"I thought you loved me," he said. "Is it your *love*, Marvie, that 'can't go on'?"

"Oh, no *no*, Claude! but may I not tell my father about our engagement? It is the concealment of it all that is so wretched—the having to slip away to meet you, not daring to say where I

am going. Often, in fact, I am obliged to say what is positively untrue in order to account for my absences. And then your letters! To have to fetch them from Turnwell Hill post-office seems so humiliating and I am sure, though it is not our own post-office, that the woman knows perfectly well who I am; and to ask for one's letters by initials is so dreadful! Oh why, why cannot our engagement be known and acknowledged?"

She had lifted her head from his shoulder whilst she spoke; and now, somehow, he had loosened his arm. For a moment or two he did not speak, then he turned his head slowly and smiled at her.

"What a storm in a tea-cup, little woman!" he said, lightly. "I thought you were a brave, sensible girl, who could be a man's friend as well as his love!"

"But yes, I am your friend—just as you are mine, and that is why I am frank enough to implore you to end this secrecy and concealment—it makes me so very wretched."

He stroked the flushed face with gentle fingers.

"Poor little soul!" he murmured. "Why, there are positively tears in those lovely eyes. How sweet they look!—dewdrops of delight! Let me kiss them away, my dearest."

"But you are not answering me, Claude!" she persisted, although she found herself unable to resist the delight of his caresses.

He laughed a little as if her earnestness amused him.

"Oh, but you know already, Marvie!" he said, lightly. "Why must we re-open all these tiresome matters? I told you that we must keep our secret for the present. If you loved me as much as you say you do, you would not find it very difficult. To my mind there is nothing so delightful as such a secret between two people who are happy in each other. Publicity ruins everything. The moment the vulgar gaze of the crowd breaks in to the sacred shrine of love—from that moment the romance and the beauty of it becomes tarnished. Don't you agree with me?"

"Yes—" she answered, slowly, after a little pause, for it seemed difficult to bring the strong light of practical common sense to bear upon such exquisitely refined sentiments. "Yes—but still—to be married, you know—one must tell one's friends and relations."

"And are you in such a desperate hurry to be married then, Marvie?"

"Oh, no, no!" she cried, blushing scarlet under his bantering looks. "I did not mean that, of course—only——"

"Only, my dear little girl, you want to eat your cake and have it, like a great many other people! Be satisfied, my dear one. Keep your cake, and be patient! I have told you already that family reasons necessitate great secrecy and caution at present. My relations——"

"Your relations perhaps want you to marry some one else?" she broke in, quickly.

"Clever little woman! how well you guess!"

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“Is she pretty?” was her truly feminine question, at which he laughed aloud quite merrily.

“You want to know too much! I am not going to marry her, at any rate.”

“No—I suppose not—since you are going to marry me, are you not?”

“I am not, at all events, going to marry anybody else,” he replied, in all sincerity.

And, somehow, after that the question at issue between them dropped. Marvie had to content herself with kisses and pretty speeches.

CHAPTER XI

LADY WISHAW IS JEALOUS

"DON'T you think it is about time the farce should come to an end?" said Lady Wishaw one morning to her guest.

Trafford, faultlessly arrayed in a knickerbocker suit, with one of his hostess's favorite Malmaison carnations in his button-hole, stood filling his pipe at the porch of Fairfield Hall. The morning was lovely, and his free-wheel cycle, polished and cleaned by one of the grooms, leant temptingly against the stone pillar of the portico. The hour and the weather were seemingly both propitious for a ride.

Now, Lady Wishaw had never been able to •master the gentle art of bicycling.

Trafford rammed the tobacco well down into the bowl of his pipe before he made any reply to the fair Sophy's observation. Then he laughed a little.

"The farce, as you call it, my dear woman, was, if you will kindly recollect, entirely of your own concoction."

"Yes, but it was to *be* a farce!—that was surely the beginning and the end of the whole concoction,

was it not?—and now it strikes me that you are rapidly turning it into a drama, my friend !”

Trafford struck a match that went out, and flung it away from him impatiently.

“Absurd !” he ejaculated. “Quite absurd ! You know very well that I objected to the whole scheme ; it was only in deference to *your* wishes, and to put things right for *you*, that I consented to go in for the tomfoolery.”

“Very well,” she replied, with admirable temper. “We are agreed, then. The time has now come to end it. Bill is quite easy in his mind about me, and he is now beginning to want to know about Marvie Mathurin.”

“How ridiculous ! Why ! there’s nothing to know.”

“Exactly. That is precisely what I have said to him. I have told him that she has refused you.”

“You—you have told him *that* ? ”

He turned round slowly and looked at her, and Sophy noticed, with secret displeasure, that he colored up to the roots of his hair.

Her displeasure vented itself in a laugh that was peculiarly irritating.

“Does that annoy you ? Has she *not* refused you, then ? That would be extremely funny ! What on earth should you do with her if she accepted you ? ”

As that was exactly what Mr. Trafford did not know himself, he remained prudently silent. He could have said a great many things, but he was

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wise in his generation—for Sophy Wishaw was a person with whom he had no wish to quarrel. She was useful to him; her house was pleasant, her cook was good, her husband's wine-cellar and cigars were alike irreproachable, and the pheasant-shooting was something to be annually looked forward to; very decidedly he did not desire to jeopardize all this.

"Come, come," he said, soothingly, turning round to her with a pleasant smile and an air of good fellowship, which had always carried weight in his little differences with the fair sex, "what has put you out with me this morning? Surely you are not going to pick a quarrel with me about such a trifle? And what am I doing so very dreadful just now, pray, that you should be so nasty to me?"

Lady Wishaw was somewhat mollified, but she was still suspicious, and her suspicions were not at all easy to allay.

"Where are you going?" she asked, with a nod towards the free-wheel.

"Going? Do you mean *now*—this morning?"

"Yes, now—this morning," she repeated.

He laughed. "Bless my soul! how can I tell? Wherever the fancy takes me for a spin, I imagine. I really have not given my route a thought. Which way is the wind, I wonder?" and Trafford sniffed the air to the right and left with a fine assumption of disingenuous innocence.

"I never knew you to be so fond of that wretched bicycling before."

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"I must have exercise, my dear woman. Just consider the way you feed me! And in the month of June what is there to do here?"

"If I could go out with you, now," she began, tentatively.

He rose to the occasion splendidly.

"Ah, why on earth *don't* you? That would indeed be delightful! Haven't I begged and entreated you to learn, over and over again?"

He was well aware that she had done her very utmost to do so. She had had lessons innumerable, and teachers galore, but as she had never been able to overcome the initial difficulty of mounting, and even when helped on to her saddle had invariably tumbled off immediately from sheer terror, it had seemed a hopeless task to persevere. Trafford knew that neither love, jealousy, or even vanity would ever turn Lady Wishaw into a cyclist; he was, therefore, perfectly safe in sighing profoundly over the sad fact of her inability to accompany him on his ride.

"I would give anything on earth," he asseverated, with pious fervor, "if you were able to go with me this morning!"

"Shall I order the pony-cart and drive alongside?" she asked, promptly.

She could almost have sworn that he colored again. At any rate, he hastened to explain, with an almost unnecessary fervor, that there was nothing on earth so disagreeable and so odious as bicycling by the side of a carriage.

"One gets smothered with dust, you know,

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and, of course, your pony could not possibly keep up with me down the hills. Will you drive me this afternoon? I shall be delighted if you will take me out. I shan't be long now—just a run of an hour for the sake of the exercise. Good-bye, I really must be off.”

“Yes—go quickly, or you might, you know, keep her waiting,” she observed, mockingly.

Trafford paused midway to his saddle.

“What on earth do you mean?”

“What I say. If you don't start, you will keep her waiting.”

“I fail to understand you,” he replied, loftily, and he looked decidedly sulky; but as she only laughed, he thought it wiser to mount his free-wheel and to ride away quickly down the avenue.

Lady Wishaw watched him till he was out of sight. Then she turned slowly and thoughtfully away and went back into the house.

“He has fallen in love with Marvie Mathurin, and he has gone to meet her,” she said to herself; and although the reflection was exceedingly wounding to her vanity, there was, nevertheless, a drop of strong consolation in the bitterness of the cup. It was owing to this consoling element that Lady Wishaw presently laughed to herself.

“Poor wretch!” she thought; and the thought was a sincere satisfaction to her. “I wonder if she imagines that he is going to marry her!”

Meanwhile Claude Trafford was flying up hill and down hill, along the six miles which divided him from Cleave Manor House, with all the

speed of which an eager spirit and a brand-new high grade free-wheel cycle were capable. And as he rode, he thought, and his thoughts were far from agreeable ones. He knew that Lady Wishaw had guessed the truth, and the truth was possibly as disconcerting to himself as to her; in fact, even more so.

For it was perfectly true that he had fallen in love with Marvie Mathurin, and it was equally true that he had no idea where this insane infatuation was going to land him. For once Claude Trafford had lost his head. He, who had always conducted his many "amourettes" with so much discretion and wisdom; who had always known exactly when to pull up; who prided himself on being a past-master in the art of extricating himself with credit and circumspection from a situation that was too difficult to maintain, had, in this instance, tumbled, like any boy of twenty, head-long into the pit! He asked himself, almost angrily, how it was that he had been such a fool, and why he had allowed himself to be drawn so far from his usual cool and deliberate methods. And man-like he put all the blame upon Lady Wishaw. Why on earth had she put the idea into his head? It was she, confound her! with her cursed selfishness, who had set the whole thing going; but for her, he should never have looked at Marvie. Girls, he said to himself, were not at all in his line. Once only he had been fool enough to get mixed up with a girl. It was a long time ago, but he had got rather badly singed

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on that occasion too. There came back to him now a vivid recollection of that episode of his past life. He remembered the face of that girl distinctly, and all the grace and the sweetness of her—remembered, too, how the soft clinging arms had fallen nervelessly away from about his neck, and how the light of life and of love had suddenly faded in those entrancing gray eyes into a night of death and darkness. Ah! he could feel the pain of it now! That had been a bad moment of his life. He shivered a little as he rode through the warm June sunshine, and he wished he had not thought of it.

“I wonder what became of her?” he thought; and then he shook his broad shoulders with a half-contemptuous laugh, and recollected Marvie Mathurin, to whom he was now hurrying.

Marvie, with her matchless form and face; with the eyes that flashed and the white teeth that shone between the rose curves of her lips; what a beauty she was! And yet it had not been for her beauty that he had fallen in love with her; it had not been for her looks that he had loved that other girl either.

Claude Trafford was not at all a good man; he was not even ‘straight’ according to a man’s code of honor, but he was, nevertheless, a man of very refined and fastidious tastes. Beauty alone had never satisfied him. The women for whom he had really cared had not been always beautiful, but there had invariably been about them some special seduction of mind or manner, some fasci-

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nating personality that had had nothing to do with form or feature.

Marvie had attracted him at first by her intractability. She was so proud, so sensitive, so quick to take offence and be angry, such a veritable rose set about with prickly thorns, that he could not but be tantalized into longing to subdue her. She was like a beautiful wild animal with her petulance and her temper, and the task of taming her to his hand was full of the exquisite fascination of novelty. He was piqued because she dared to set her will against his; and he swore that he would break both her pride and her will by making her fall in love with him; but in accomplishing this task, he, unfortunately, fell in love himself, and this was altogether more than he had bargained for.

From that moment he had, of course, placed himself at a disadvantage, and the play, that was to have been played only for his own amusement, grew into sober earnest for him. As to her, he could not rightly tell whether or no she had indeed succumbed so thoroughly to his influence as he had intended her to do, and although she had in a measure yielded to his love, he could not be altogether sure that her ardor approached, in any way, the standard which he desired it to attain.

How much did she love him? he asked of himself, constantly, and how far would her love carry her?

He knew, of course, that he was playing a very

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dangerous game, and that by every dictate of common sense and of prudence the moment had now arrived when he ought to throw up his cards.

But somehow he could not bring himself to do this yet—the doing of it would be too painful and too unpleasant; a day or two longer, he said to himself, he must have; for to have gained so much, only to resign everything, was too hard a thing for him to face.

He turned in at the half-broken-down gate of Cleave Manor. The gate stood open—she must, therefore, be already here, waiting for him. That was as it should be. Trafford liked women to wait for him. Nevertheless his heart began to beat a little faster. The drive up to the deserted house ran through a grove of gigantic Portugal laurels, that had remained unpruned for years, and whose long gaunt arms flung themselves across the road and joined overhead in an archway of sombre and melancholy greenery. The drive itself was overgrown with weeds and moss. The undergrowth of shrubbery on either side was choked with a tangle of briars and nettles. This lasted right up to the quadrangle of the house and terrace. There were no openings by the way. Suddenly the shrubberies ended, and the half-ruined old Tudor house, with its gables and its twisted chimneys, with the many twinkling diamond panes in its mullioned windows, and the unpruned wealth of wistaria and white star-blossomed clematis that were bursting into flower under the warm June sunshine, stood out in its picturesque

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and desolate beauty close before him. A flight of broken steps led up to the terrace that ran round to the south of the house, and at these steps he had usually found a lady's bicycle, and a tall and gracious lady awaiting him. But to-day there was neither bicycle nor lady.

Yet she must be here, or else why was the entrance gate left open?

He dismounted, leant his machine up against the terrace wall, and proceeded to mount the steps in a leisurely fashion. He felt annoyed with her because she was not to greet him. "Just like her confounded pride! the witch!" he muttered to himself; "she likes to try her power over me!"

He turned the corner of the house and stood on the broad stone-flagged southern terrace. Then he stood still for a moment in blank disappointment. From end to end it appeared to be empty.

Yet a moment later he caught sight of a brown cob, with a lady's saddle on his back, browsing peacefully on the rough grass of the long unmown lawns below the terrace. She must, then, have ridden to-day; he had never heard her say she possessed a brown cob. But where was she?

He moved a few steps forward. The action revealed to him the figure of a woman in a gray habit, with her back towards him, leaning over the wall of the terrace. A bush of white lilac, that climbed up from the bed below, had hitherto concealed her from him.

But it was not Marvie. A small woman this, with a tiny waist, and a knot of soft light-brown

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hair dressed low beneath the rim of her sailor hat. Some stranger, no doubt, who had ridden over to see the place. What a mercy she had not encountered Marvie ; or, perhaps, Marvie was even now in hiding, concealed in the shrubbery, until their solitude should be once more free of the invader.

He advanced a few steps towards the figure in the gray habit. He wished she would turn round, and wondered—such is the force of habit—if she was pretty. He scented a fresh adventure, and the possibility of it quickened his pulses with rising interest.

He came nearer to her, and the sound of his footsteps echoed on the stone flags beneath them.

The little woman in the gray habit stood upright and turned round.

He found himself face to face with young Mrs. Mathurin.

CHAPTER XII.

AN INTERCEPTED LETTER.

WIDOW DRAKE, at the post-office of Turnwell Hill, was upon the list of Edna Mathurin's poorer friends. The list was a fairly long one, and promised to be longer still, for Mrs. Mathurin had a wonderful gift for winning the hearts of the poor. She confined her charitable visits to no particular area or district, but wherever sickness and trouble were to be found within her reach, there did her sympathy and compassion take her, to do everything she possibly could for the sufferers.

A sick baby at the post-office of Turnwell Hill was her original introduction to Mrs. Drake. Having a baby of her own, she had an especial sympathy for all other babies. Mrs. Drake's baby was said to be 'wasting away.' It was a case of constitutional delicacy, requiring constant good feeding on expensive and strengthening things that were out of the power of his mother to procure for him. When the winter was over, the baby picked up his strength and began to thrive well, and Mrs. Drake always declared that Mrs. Mathurin had saved her Bobby's life, whilst

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Edna said, in smiling answer, that really she had done very little. But Mrs. Drake was grateful ever after, and remained enthusiastically devoted to the kind lady who had ridden or driven the four miles from Western Lodge so often, in all weathers, to bring all kinds of nourishing delicacies to her child. Twice a week, all through the long winter months, had Mrs. Mathurin found her way to Turnwell Hill—even the great snowstorm that had lasted over a week had not kept her away; her strong little cob had stumbled along bravely through the snow-laden lanes, and the bottle of turtle soup had been safely delivered at Mrs. Drake's door. The good woman declared that she would never forget it to her dying day.

Now that Bobby was getting quite well, and as strong and hearty as other children of his age, Mrs. Mathurin did not come very often to Turnwell Hill, which was rather an out-of-the-way little place, but should she pass through the village street on her way to other places, Mrs. Drake never failed to see her benefactress over the top of the muslin blind of her little office, and to fly out into the road with a word of greeting and welcome. And on one particular morning Mrs. Mathurin did ride through that village street, mounted on her brown cob. She was thinking at the moment of other things, and had forgotten the grateful mother of her little patient, until Mrs. Drake's voice aroused her to a sense her near proximity.

Mrs. Mathurin — please — ma'am." Edna

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pulled up her little horse and turned round with a smile.

"Oh, Mrs. Drake! how are you? and how is Bobby? keeping well I hope?"

"Oh, Bobby's all right, ma'am—he crawls about all over the floor now, as cheeky as you please, thanks to you, ma'am; it's all I can do to catch him, the rascal, before he gets out on the road. It ain't about Bobby I make so bold as to stop you, ma'am, it's this 'ere letter," and the post-mistress held up an envelope. "You see it's 'Immediate' in the corner, and thinking it might be of importance, I didn't know if I hadn't better re-direct it to Miss Mathurin, but if you'd be so good as to give it to her, ma'am——?"

"But is it for Miss Mathurin?" asked Edna, turning the letter dubiously over; "are you sure, Mrs. Drake?"

The letter was addressed—

"M. M., care of Post Office,
Turnwell Hill. To be called for."

"It cannot be meant for Miss Mathurin." added Edna with conviction, "you must be mistaken; and yet—" she went on, looking fixedly at the writing before her eyes, and somehow as she looked her color rose and her heart began to beat.

"Oh, yes, ma'am, there's been a number of these letters, and Miss Mathurin comes over most days to ask for them herself. She don't think that I knows her, but, in course, after liv-

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ing here, single and married and widdered, twelve year come next Michaelmas, it ain't wonderful that I knows her by sight. But I didn't let on that I knew who she was, for I've seen a good bit o' courtin' in my day—both of high and low—and they, none on 'em, like to be took notice of, so I warn't going to let her think I guessed nothin.' But young folks will be young folks, and you bein', as it were, her mother, ma'am, why, as it's marked 'Immediate,' I thought you would be so good as to take it to her for once, unless you think I'd better keep it till she calls?"

"I will give it to her, Mrs. Drake," said Edna, a little thoughtfully, and placed it in her saddle pocket. Then she smiled round at the post-mistress: "ladies often, you know, put advertisements into newspapers in that way to be answered with initials and addressed to some post office, it's a very common thing to do, and Miss Mathurin is, I believe, thinking of changing her maid. No doubt she has advertised for one." And then, to her horror, Mrs. Drake looked up at her with a broad smile and—winked, plainly and undisguisedly!

"Yes, ma'am, I knows that. But then all the letters wouldn't be in the same handwriting, would they?"

Edna colored hotly, nodded a brief farewell, and sticking her heel into her cob's side, trotted quickly away.

When she had passed the village and found herself quite away from observation, she drew the

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letter out of the pocket of the saddle again and looked at it attentively.

Now if there is one thing a woman never forgets, it is the handwriting of a man she has once loved, and the handwriting on this mysterious missive was one she had by no means forgotten.

Edna Mathurin could never satisfactorily settle with her conscience whether what she did next was, or was not, the greatest crime she had ever been guilty of in her whole life.

There are ends that had better be left forever unattained than be brought about by the only means available for their attainment. Again, there are means which, in consideration of the imperative desirability of the end, are almost justifiable and altogether pardonable. Edna always hoped that the action she took might be reckoned amongst the latter category. But she was never sure.

The arguments that flashed through her mind were brief and few, but they all pointed the same way.

"She is my husband's child, and if I can save her—anyhow—I ought to do so. If she has fallen into the hands of the writer of this letter, she is in danger. Nobody stands still and does nothing when a person is drowning before their eyes. Accident has given me the power—I will not allow cowardice to rob me of the chance of saving her."

And then she opened the letter. It consisted only of a few lines:

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"My darling. I shall be able, after all, I find, to meet you on Tuesday at Cleave Manor; be there at eleven o'clock as usual.—Yours,

"CLAUDE TRAFFORD.

"I only trust you will get this in time, as our original plan was for Wednesday."

Edna gave a little gasp. "Tuesday was to-day!" She looked at her watch; it was five-and-twenty minutes to eleven. Marvie had gone up to London that morning to see her dressmaker. Edna had begged her to put off the expedition till the Wednesday, as she herself wanted to go to town that day; but she recalled now, with a clearer understanding, how Marvie had insisted, somewhat sullenly, on going to-day, and Edna had only thought sadly at the time that she had not desired her society. Now she could see that there were other reasons that had influenced her.

"What shall I do?" thought Edna.

The brown cob, left to his own devices, was slowly climbing a long hilly lane. On either side beech-woods bordered the road. Their long graceful branches leant across and interlaced themselves over her head, making a delightful shade from the heat of the sun. Yet here and there a shaft of golden light shot through the leaves and threw checkered lights across the whiteness of the road. Clumps of fern clustered in the hedgerows; countless flowers of all descriptions—blue-bells and fox-gloves, starwort and snapdragon, and the lace-like heads of the cow-grass

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—dotted the grassy slopes beneath the trees; yellow butterflies fluttered across the road, and myriads of winged atoms whirled in the air, or a dragon-fly spun by heavily on noisy wings. Yet, plunged in thought, Edna saw none of these things.

“What shall I do?” was the question in her mind. And every instinct of self-interest carried her at first in the same direction.

“Do nothing. Incur no responsibility, go home and place the whole matter in your husband’s hands.”

“Yes, and make a deadlier enemy of Marvie than ever,” replied, after a while, another something within her, that was neither selfish nor self-seeking; “and it would not save her, after all. Would he not find other means, other ways of getting to her; would anything stop him?—short of——”

And then again the voice that was cowardly and selfish struck in once more.

“Let it alone. It is none of your business; give the letter to her to-night, tell her why you opened it, and warn her—that is really all that is in any way your duty. If she will not believe you, tell her father, and wash your hands of the responsibility. She has treated you badly and unkindly, why should you subject yourself to what would be a very terrible ordeal for the sake of a girl who has done her best to make your life miserable!”

But Edna Mathurin at her best was a brave and

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unselfish woman, and these promptings of her lower nature did not prevail with her.

And, moreover, she thought of Ray. She remembered that Ray had been her friend ever since the day she had first set foot in her husband's house, where, but for him, her welcome would have been cold enough.

She seemed to see him now, as he had gathered the crying babe, with tender solicitude, into his arms, on the evening of their arrival, carrying him slowly and carefully up the broad oak staircase. She remembered how her eyes had followed him, a little anxiously at first, because he was a stranger; but how presently her anxiety had been transformed into perfect trust and confidence, for the firelight had flickered on his fair young face, and she had said to herself that it was a good face—the face of a brave and gentle Englishman; and little Jack had perhaps thought so too, for he had ceased crying, and had crooned up confidently to his bearer. And ever since—ever since—Ray had stood by her.

Would it not be worth everything if she could save Marvie for Ray?

The sturdy brown cob had reached the summit of the long hill. A sign-post crowned its apex, and two roads stretched away from it in different directions.

On one arm of the signpost was inscribed, "Western Hamlets, 4 miles,"—this was the name of the village in which Western Lodge was situated—and on the other, "Fairfield, 7 miles."

Edna had originally intended to take the left-hand road towards home ; but now, after less than a minute of reflection, she turned into the right-hand road. Now Cleave Manor lay about a mile along the Fairfield Road. For Edna by this time had made up her mind as to what she was to do. She had got to see this man herself. There was a question she was bound to put to him, and in no other way could she possibly get at the answer to that question save through himself.

It might be that the answer would be satisfactory, and, in that case, she did not certainly see how she was to take any further responsibility concerning her stepdaughter's actions. If Marvie was bent on self-destruction, short of speaking to her husband, which was a strong measure, she did not think there was anything more she could do.

But Edna could not but feel that it was infinitely more probable, if not almost a certainty, that there could be no satisfactory answer to that question. Else, why these secret meetings and initialed letters to a distant post-office ?

When a love affair is straightforward and honorable and above-board, argued Edna to herself, deceit and intrigue are not needed. The fact of such methods being employed denotes plainly enough that there is something to be concealed. And, moreover, Edna knew the man. Well, ah ! all too well did she know him ! Had he not wrecked her past and seared her heart as with a hot iron, so that it seemed to be dead and dumb to all love forever and ever ! That it was dead

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also to pain, Edna could not but fervently pray, as her cob cantered merrily on towards the crumbling gateway of Cleave Manor. But of that she was more doubtful. Pain has an unexpected way of cropping up again, long after we think it has been satisfactorily crushed to death. Love dies hard—but the pain of love dies harder still. To many people it lives on and on through life, till the great last Enemy of all lays it, and all else within us, to a final rest in our narrow graves.

Edna's sense of shuddering reluctance at the prospect of the interview that lay before her caused her to fear that that cruel pain, which had been at one time her daily and hourly companion, was by no means so extinct a thing as she had fondly imagined. What if it were not dead, but only gone to sleep? As she neared the ruined gates she pulled up her horse to a walk, and consulted her watch. It wanted still a few minutes to eleven o'clock. An eager lover would be there by now at the trysting-place, but, as I have said, Edna knew her man, and she did not believe he would be waiting.

He was not. And it was she who waited fully a quarter of an hour on the terrace, leaning across the gray stone balustrade that was festooned with the long trails of a jackmanni clematis, with garlands of deep purple blossoms.

And it is not to be denied that those moments of waiting were very terrible to her.

This man had been the love of her life; to this hour she bore the scars that he had inflicted

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upon her. Their last meeting had been a tragedy, and she had prayed to God aloud that she might never see him in this world again. How would the sight of him affect her now, after four long years?

It was a relief to her when she heard his step behind her. She turned round abruptly and met him.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PAINFUL MEETING.

"Good God!" The exclamation broke from his lips with a note of actual horror.

He had run lightly up the steps of the terrace, but when she turned round and he saw her face, he stopped short, and for a moment there was a sort of giddiness before his eyes.

Young Mrs. Mathurin stood looking at him. In spite of her courage and her self-control her lips trembled, and she was afraid to trust her voice. He was so exactly the same as he used to be!—the years had not altered him in the slightest.

And then Trafford, who was not the man to lose his head for long, pulled himself together and regained his equanimity. He stepped forward with a smile and held out his hand.

"Edna Coulston! this is indeed an unexpected encounter! can it be really you? How in the name of all that is wonderful did you get here?" and to himself he added, "and how in the world am I going to get you out of the way before Marvie turns up!" And aloud he added:

"What brings you here?"

"That," said Edna, recovering the use of her voice, "is precisely the question I have come

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here to ask of you ! Will you sit down here for a few minutes and talk to me, Mr. Trafford ? I have something to say to you ; please be so kind as to sit down on this bench and I will tell you what it is," and she turned to one of the moss-grown stone benches behind her.

"My dear girl, you are extremely kind and flattering," he began, with a touch of impatient contempt, "but I have not really a moment at my disposal. I have to get back quickly—an early lunch—people especially invited to meet me ; you will understand, I am sure. I only looked in here on my way back to the house where I am staying in this neighborhood to—to—" his eyes strayed hopelessly about, "to gather some of these blue flowers for my hostess' dinner-table to-night. I must just pick them and be off."

Edna, for the life of her, could not help a laugh.

"Surely Lady Wishaw has a clematis jackmanni at Fairfield ! Don't pray ruin the one here for nothing !"

Trafford's hand dropped, and he turned round in some surprise.

"You know Lady Wishaw then ? you know that I am staying with her ?"

"Yes, I know. Do not please invent any more excuses ; you need not either be uneasy or grudge me the few moments of conversation that I wish to have with you. We shall not be interrupted ; the lady you expected to meet this morning is not coming. She has gone to London for the day"

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He looked at her in unfeigned amazement. "How the dickens do you know I expected to meet a lady here?" he inquired.

"Pray sit down."

She had already sat down herself, and she tapped her brown gloved hand impatiently upon the vacant space at her side.

He looked at her a little uncertainly. How pretty and attractive she was!—no, not pretty exactly, Edna was never really pretty—only extraordinarily piquante—'fetching' was the word he used in his own mind; and what wonderful eyes she had!

"Are you quite certain the—the lady you speak of is not coming? Did she send you with a message?" he inquired, doubtfully.

"No, I have no message—but I know she has gone, because I saw her go off to the station."

At that he sat down, and it is to be feared that the certainty of Marvie's absence caused him to experience a very decided thrill of revived interest in the woman at his side.

"When we are far from the lips that we love,
It's best to make love to the lips that are near,"

had ever been Claude Trafford's motto, both in theory and practice.

And Edna watched his face and understood it. She knew every line of that face by heart; there was not a shade or a gleam upon it that she did not remember as well as if she had seen it only yesterday. And once she had thought it the

finest face on earth—the noblest, the best, the most fascinating. Ah, well! it was fascinating still, she admitted that—but what had seemed to her once to be noble and good in it, was there no longer for her, because she knew him to be bad and false. For a few seconds her thoughts became so full of memories that she could find no words. But Trafford had no embarrassments.

“Come, it really is a pleasure to see you again, little Edna!” he cried gaily, “I’ve oftener wondered what became of you, and, upon my soul, I’ve regretted you hundreds of times. If you hadn’t been such a confounded little fool, my dear girl! Ah, well, I won’t allude to all that, as you don’t like it; but really, child, I declare you look younger and prettier than ever. What have you been about to have improved so much? Your eyes were always the most fetching eyes in the world, and they are just the same as ever, but somehow you seem to have developed all sorts of new points. You have been turned into a woman of the world, little Edna! and—” with a comprehensive glance that took in every item of her attire, from the well-made cloth habit down to the dainty gloves and boots, and up again to the single stone diamonds in her tiny ears—“and, somehow, you look well turned out—well-to-do and prosperous! What has happened to you, my little Edna?”

Then at last Edna found her voice.

“Please do not talk to me in that way, or call me by my Christian name. You ask me what

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has happened to me—I will tell you: I am married, and my name is Mrs. Mathurin.”

“Mrs. Mathurin!” he repeated, in black consternation, “you are then——?”

“I am Marvel Mathurin’s stepmother, and that is why I have a right to ask you a question—knowing what I do of you—before I speak to her father of the meetings which are taking place here between you and his daughter.”

“The girl has betrayed me then?—she has told you?” His face grew suddenly dark with anger.

“She has told me nothing. I found this letter at the Turnwell Hill post-office; I recognized your handwriting, and so I opened and read it. You can have it back now,” and she held out the letter to him.

“My word! that was a bold thing to do, Mrs. Mathurin! I wonder how you dare open a letter not addressed to yourself?”

“I dare a good deal, Claude Trafford, as perhaps you will find out! I have, you see, dared to come here on purpose to ask you that question; you know what it is. Has that obstacle ceased to exist?—or is it still there? Answer me the truth.”

For long moments the man was silent. He leant forward upon his knees, staring at the stone pavement below him, and turning his shoulder upon her, he frowned heavily, and gnawed angrily at his mustache. At his heart there were curses strong and deep; the pleasant sins of the past had indeed been turned into scorpions wherewith

to chastise him, in the person of this woman who had so mysteriously reappeared out of the 'long ago' of past experiences. What cursed bad luck that she should have married Marvie's father!

And then he thought of Marvie herself, his "rose set about with wilful thorns," and the very thought that he might be on the point of losing her set up at once a dogged determination in his mind that he would never do so. Good heavens! here were just the two women in the whole world whom he had ever really wanted and desired intensely, this one—little coward! little prude!—had thrown him over and had hurt him badly in the doing of it; and was he to lose the other one as well because of her?

He swore to himself that he would not lose her. Edna was jealous probably; women are such cats to each other! It was nothing but sheer jealousy her opening the other girl's letter and coming here to upbraid him. But Marvie loved him, and if she stuck to him, what harm could Edna do him; she might threaten, but who would listen to her if Marvie believed in him still, and Marvie would continue to believe in him—that is—if—if——

And the very fear that she might be lost to him rendered her at once ten times more valuable in his eyes than she had ever been before.

At all costs Marvie's faith in him must remain unshaken. She did not like the concealment very much, but she had not, as yet, questioned his integrity.

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But how would it be if Edna were to relate to her stepdaughter that old story about him?

He sat leaning forward, looking moodily down at the stone flags at his feet. He felt no remorse nor regret, excepting so far as his own selfish aims had been defeated with regard to the woman at his side. She was none the worse; apparently she had feathered her own nest. What was there to be sorry for?

Oh, yes, he was a bad man! Edna realized it to the full as she watched him steadily. He was selfish and unprincipled, without truth and without honor. Yet many men liked him, and most women loved him; there was that about him that was irresistible—a strong personality, a seductive charm, a something that was indescribable, and yet none the less alluring. Even Edna felt the fascination of it still, and Marvie—poor Marvie!—it went to her heart to think what sorrow might not be in store for the proud wilful girl.

“I am waiting for your answer,” she said at last, seeing that he continued silent.

He lifted himself up slowly from his drooping attitude, and looked at her fully.

“So it has come to that, has it?—that you mean to ruin me?”

“No, only to save my husband’s daughter,” she answered, quickly.

He waved a deprecatory hand. “It is the same thing; you want to rake up a discreditable story about me, so that you may injure me in your stepdaughter’s eyes. How you must hate me, Edna!

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Oh, don't interrupt me ; what does it matter to you what I call you ; you can never be anything less than 'Edna' to me were you married fifty times over ! How fond you were of me once, do you remember ?—under the apple tree in the orchard ?—how your little white figure used to come stealing out to meet me in the moonlight, and your arms would go up about my neck, and your warm lips uplift themselves to mine ; and that last time, how you wept and clung to me ; have you forgotten ? ”

She sprang to her feet.

“ I forbid you to speak of it ; be silent. All that is dead and gone—forever—it lies cold in the grave ; how dare you disturb those dead ashes. I will not have you speak of those days, Claude Trafford ! ”

She had walked away from him in her agitation ; but she pulled herself together and came back to him. After all, did she not know him ; was it not all a clever piece of acting ; the acting instinct was so strong in this man ! She was not going to let him see her deadly weakness ; it was to be a trial of wits between them ; well then, she could be as clever as he was !

“ All that is absolute nonsense, and you know it is,” she said calmly, as she came back and stood in front of him. “ We won't speak of those days, because, as I say, they are dead—dead as Queen Anne—for both of us. I am married, and——”

“ And, of course, you told all your little past

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history to your husband?" he observed, looking keenly up at her.

"No. I did not. I told him nothing. Some things have cut one too deeply to be spoken of."

She spoke bravely, but her color rose painfully.

"That was foolish of you, Edna, because some one else might tell him," he observed, dryly.

"I am not afraid. No one could tell him but yourself, and not only are you very unlikely to do so, but he would not believe you if you did. I am not afraid of you."

"You need not be. I am not the sort of chap to play such a dirty trick on a woman. Only let it be live and let live between us, my dear girl. Of course I can't, I suppose, expect you to be my friend with regard to Marvie; that would, perhaps, be more than female human nature could rise to, but, at least, do not be my enemy."

"You do not seem to understand me, Mr. Trafford. I should have no objection in the world to standing your friend, as you say, with my stepdaughter, if I honestly believed you to be worthy of her. I have no personal feeling in the matter; have I not said already that the past is dead—and buried?"

"Oh, as to being worthy, my dear lady!—why, where will you find a man of my age who will not frankly admit himself to be unworthy of the regard of a girl of two-and-twenty? That sort of remark is very vague, and means nothing at all!"

"But I meant a great deal more than that, I

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meant something quite definite, and you know very well what I do mean."

And when he made no answer, she went on :

"Are you in earnest? Do you honestly mean to marry Marvel Mathurin?"

He laughed a little awkwardly.

"Why, yes, of course—I suppose so— if I can."

"Ah, but *can* you? that is what I will know. Are you free to marry her?—or is it still with you as it was that—that—day when you told me under the apple tree?"

A moment of silence. Then she burst forth into hot indignation.

"If you are not free, then I shall tell her father. You shall not ruin her life!"

"God bless my soul! what a little termagant you are! Do give me time, Edna. That's what you women never will do, none of you will ever give a man time. I am going to tell you: sit down again, do, there's a dear girl, and exercise the virtue of patience. There, that's better! now we can talk."

She was forced to do as he told her. There was never a day when Claude Trafford had not had his own way with women.

Edna saw that to oppose and thwart him would be the worst way of all with him. If she wanted the truth she must humor him, and even then she was not at all sure that he would tell her the truth or the whole truth. There was never any certainty about this man.

Nevertheless, she resigned herself to learn what she could, according to his own fashion of telling. He made a long story of it.

"You see," he began, "it is very difficult to me to give you the sort of answer you want, the 'yes' or 'no' sort of answer."

"Why should it be difficult?"

"Because it is neither one thing nor the other."

"But that is ridiculous!"

"Not at all. You ask me if the obstacle still exists?—well, it may have existed yesterday, but it is not at all certain that it exists to-day; at any moment it may be gone; it may be gone now, whilst you and I sit talking here! You look bewildered; well, what must it be to me, whose whole happiness depends upon it? You might have a little pity for me, Edna!"

Mrs. Mathurin gave a sigh of desperation.

"If you would only speak plainly, I might, as you say, pity you; but you are so vague, I really don't know in the least what you mean."

He looked at her fixedly and gloomily for a moment, as though he were taking his courage in both hands; then in a whisper he spoke four words:

"Last stages of consumption," and he nodded solemnly at her as though to emphasize the words.

"Good gracious, how horrible!—and you—you are—*waiting* for this?"

"Of course. How can I help waiting?"

"And it does not grieve or distress you?"

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He opened the palms of his hands and held his head on one side.

"I don't pretend to be a saint, you know," he said, "there are extenuating circumstances."

"But this is brutal, surely!"

"That is as how you choose to look at it. I don't think so."

"And you have told Marvie?"

"Told Marvie! what do you take me for? I may be a brute, but I am not a fool!"

"Then she knows nothing?"

"Nothing whatever. Why should she know. It's only a matter of a few days or a week, perhaps. Marvie knows only just what I have told her, that I can't come and speak to her father about our engagement until certain family matters, which I am unable to explain to her, be satisfactorily settled. The dear girl is content to trust me and to wait."

"If she knew—what you tell me—she would turn from you in disgust!"

"Very likely, girls are often foolishly fastidious; that is why I have not shocked her ears with the story. You don't give me credit for much, Edna; perhaps you have no cause to do so, but you might believe that I shall be glad to turn over a new leaf and begin afresh!"

"You really mean, then, to marry her?" She asked the question rather slowly. She was shaken, but she was not altogether convinced.

"Why, of course I do, and a lucky fellow I shall be to win so sweet a wife! Come, Edna, be

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generous !—you have found out our mutual secret, and you know one that is mine only, be the dear good little woman you always have been, and respect those secrets. Can you not hold your tongue ? ”

“ If you will give me your word of honor that you will go right away, and not attempt either to see or to write to Marvie until the day when you can come forward honestly and claim her from her father, then I will hold my tongue, not otherwise.”

He looked sulky for a minute or two and was silent, then he tossed up his face with a laugh. “ You have got me on toast, you know ! I can’t help myself, can I ? ”

“ No, I don’t think you can.”

“ Am I not to see her—just once ? ”

“ Not once. Have you any right to see her ? You must take yourself out of her way entirely, and leave her absolutely free until you can speak to her openly, and as an honest man.”

“ You are awfully down on a fellow, Edna,” he grumbled, “ it’s beastly hard lines, on my soul it is ! ”

“ If you really care for her, you will not think so. However, you can do as you like ; if you will not promise, neither will I be silent. You can take it or leave it, you see,” and she made as though she would go towards her cob.

“ Obstinate little wretch ! Oh, yes of course, I must promise ; you leave me no alternative.”

She paused and turned to him.

“ You will go away ? ”

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"This very day. I swear."

"You will make no attempt to write to her?"

"None whatever."

"Neither will you try to see her until your wife is dead?"

"All right, that's settled; all this do I promise and swear. It reminds me of the Public Baptism of Infants. I was once a godfather." But he was powerless to raise the faintest smile on her stern young face. "I don't think you believe in my promises very much," he added, as he helped her on to her pony.

She did not, but she was far too wise to admit it.

"On the contrary," she said, "I have the most implicit faith in them," and then she rode away.

But on the way home she asked of herself many anxious questions.

Was any of it real? Was what he had told her the truth, or was it just a hastily-concocted story to meet the exigencies of the moment? Were even his professions of affection towards Marvie genuine? or was the whole thing nothing but a clever bit of acting? And for the life of her she could not be certain. There might be something of truth in what he had told her, but she was very sure that there were also a great many lies.

CHAPTER XIV.

SOPHY'S REVELATIONS.

THERE were no more letters for Marvie at the Turnwell Hill post-office.

She went over five or six times to ask for them in vain, till at last she grew ashamed to go into the little office. Mrs. Drake looked so oddly at her ; she smiled at her meaningly, pityingly even, Marvie fancied, and one day she allowed the girl to see that she knew who she was.

"I'm really sorry, Miss, but there haven't been one for you lately ; it seems such a trouble for you to keep on coming here—should I forward them to Western Lodge if any comes?"

And Marvie had blushed scarlet, as she had made hasty reply that, yes, perhaps that would be the best way.

After that Mrs. Drake saw her no more. The good woman had been careful not to mention the letter she had confided to Mrs. Mathurin's charge. She was not quite sure that that transaction came within the post-office rules and regulations, and she was anxious, above all, not to get herself into trouble ; she was a poor widow, and she might lose her place.

So Marvie knew nothing—only that her lover

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neither came nor wrote, and that he had seemingly disappeared out of her life.

On the Wednesday—the day after Edna's meeting with Trafford—Marvie had started forth on her bicycle full of the glad expectation of seeing her lover. But after waiting over an hour at Cleave Manor, she had given up hope and had gone sadly home again.

She was puzzled, as well as bitterly disappointed. She could not understand why he had failed to keep his appointment with her. At first she made sure that he would write and explain, but when day after day went by, and no letter came from him, she began to feel hurt and wounded by his silence, and a little anxious into the bargain, for might he not be ill, and unable to write to her? She grew restless and miserable. She could not sleep at night, and all day long she could settle to nothing; the worry of it began to tell upon her nerves and her general health.

At last there came a day when she could endure the suspense no longer. She determined to go over to Fairfield and see Lady Wishaw, for surely she would know something about Trafford; perhaps, indeed, he was there still, and a vague jealousy towards Sophy, deep down in her heart, helped to strengthen her in her decision to go and see for herself if her lover was still there.

The distance to Fairfield and back was beyond her riding limits, so she went half way by train and then bicycled out four miles to Fairfield Hall from the station nearest to it, arriving at the house

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just as her cousin and his wife were sitting down to lunch. They welcomed her cordially.

"This is capital!" cried Sir William, joyfully and gayly. "I only wish you would take us oftener by surprise like this, my dear Marvie!"

"You are a perfect godsend, my dear girl," chimed in Sophy. "I have been simply bored to death for the last week, and I was yawning my head off with dulness all the morning. Come, sit down, you must be starving."

"Fish—cutlets—cold lamb? what will you have, my dear?" inquired Bill Wishaw. Marvie threw a quick glance about her. The footman was laying a place for her at the empty side of the table; there was evidently no one at all staying in the house. She was half relieved, and yet secretly disappointed, to find he was not here.

"Are you two all by yourselves, then?" she asked, cheerfully, as she began to tackle the food upon her plate, "No company? no guests? just Darby and Joan?"

"That's it," replied her cousin. "Darby and Joan, as you say. I only wish it happened oftener. Sophy and I are never so happy as when we are alone together, are we, my love?"

"I ought to apologize for intruding upon your honeymoon," said Marvie, with her eyes riveted upon her plate. And Lady Wishaw thought she could detect a little exasperating sneer in her dearest friend's remark.

Bill chatted on about nothing at all to his young cousin. He liked her, and was genuinely

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glad to see her; and Sophy said to herself, "I wonder if she has come to find out anything about Claude."

"Well, Miss Mathurin," said Sir William, suddenly, when the men-servants had left the room, "I suppose you have come to give us some good news. Out with it, my dear."

"News, cousin Bill!" repeated the girl in bewilderment, "but I don't know any news——"

"Oh, come! don't be so sly! don't pretend not to know what I mean! aha! am I not to be told yet? is it all to be kept for Sophy's private ear after lunch? I think you might let me have the pleasure of drinking your health."

Marvie reddened slowly. "I—don't understand you, cousin Bill. I have nothing to tell you—or Sophy."

"Nothing yet! well, upon my word, these modern lovers do take their time; in my day the wooing was not so long adoin'g, and all this hanging about after a girl and not coming to the scratch wouldn't have been tolerated. Well, I hope you'll tell us in good time, my dear, for I expect your young man won't be much longer declaring himself, now that he has been to stay at your father's house.

Marvie's face was a picture of bewilderment, and her eyes grew round with amazement. But Lady Wishaw jumped up hurriedly from the table.

"Bill, you are positively indecent with your questions, and your poking and prying. I won't

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have Marvie bullied. Come along at once with me, Marvie, darling, and don't listen to that silly old cousin of yours," and she drew the girl's arm within hers. "No, we won't have any coffee, thanks, or else we will have it in my boudoir. You have just teased the poor child too much—look how red she is!"

"Teased her! why, really, my dear, I only wanted to know the upshot of Trafford's visit, and after he has told you that he was going there on purpose to——"

Lady Wishaw slammed the dining-room door in her husband's face and dragged Marvie across the hall into her morning room.

"What *did* he mean?" cried Marvie, "tell me at once. What have you said to him, Sophy?"

"Oh! I only told him that Claude had gone over to see your father on business, *I thought*. I *had* to say something, you see, to account for his going away in such a hurry, and Bill began to fidget—he always does fidget, you know."

"Then Mr. Trafford has gone away?"

"Yes, he left us last Tuesday week, rather suddenly. That's Claude's way. It didn't surprise me."

Marvie ground her teeth. Sophy's assumption of superior knowledge of the man who claimed to be her own lover was gall and bitterness to her.

"You do not know where he is?" she forced herself to ask calmly.

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"No, nor you, I suppose, either?" and Sophy threw a quick sharp glance at her from beneath uplifted eyebrows. Marvie shook her head.

"No, of course. I didn't suppose you did, my dear; not likely—as even I don't know for the moment where he is. He will turn up again when it suits him. That's Claude's way. Have some coffee, Marvie?" The butler had come in with the coffee.

Marvie took some. It was strong and black, and as she gulped it down, it seemed to steady her nerves.

"You know," said Lady Wishaw, when they were alone again, "we can't keep this farce up forever, Marvie, and my poor old man must be let down easy. You see, I had to make out that Claude was *épris* with you; it was the only way I got out of that scrape about London. Funny, wasn't it! and Bill believed it absolutely, believes it still."

"You—you mean, you told Bill that—that—Mr. Trafford was——"

"In love with you. Yes, exactly. It made him quite easy in his mind, dear old thing. And Claude fell into the plan at once—he thought it a capital idea; but, of course, one can carry a joke too far, and I think the best thing we can do now is to tell Bill that Claude Trafford proposed to you, but that you have refused him. If you don't like to tell him yourself, I will—I will tell him to-day after you have gone."

"You will do nothing of the sort."

Lady Wishaw looked up with a little start. Marvie's voice was oddly harsh and sharp. She had risen from her chair, and stood facing her with one hand on the high mantelshelf. Her face was white, and her dark eyes blazed with anger.

Sophy began to feel rather uncomfortable.

"My *dear* Marvie!—why, what on earth is it? Why do you look like a tragedy queen?"

But Marvie brushed aside her words as if they were cobwebs.

"You will *not* tell your husband that I have refused to marry Claude Trafford, because it is not true. I have not refused him. I have promised to marry him.

It was Sophy's turn to stare at her in consternation.

For a moment anger almost over-mastered her, for she had the unreasoning jealousy of a vain woman, and her vanity was a thing that it was dangerous to trample upon. Her voice shook with rage.

"Then it *was* to meet you that he went off bicycling nearly every day, all the time he was here. He met you somewhere half-way, I suppose?"

Marvie was reckless.

"Yes," she said, "we met at Cleave Manor nearly every day."

"And he has made love to you?"

"He has asked me to be his wife," was her proud reply.

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Lady Wishaw sat looking at her for a moment in silence. Little by little her anger abated, and a scornful pity filled her.

"My poor Marvie?" she murmured.

"*Poor!* why am I 'poor,' pray?" cried Marvie, defiantly. "I am not poor. I am, on the contrary, *rich*—richer than all the gold in the world could make me, for Claude Trafford loves me. Do you hear? he *loves* me."

"My poor child," said Lady Wishaw, gently, "do you not understand that the only woman in the world whom Claude Trafford loves, or ever will love, is myself."

"Oh, no, Sophy! men do not *love* women like you; they may play at it, they may even pretend very cleverly, but how can you imagine that Claude Trafford—or any good man—could really *love* a married woman who tricks and deceives a husband who is kind and generous to her, as yours is. It is not *love* he feels; it is something very, very different."

It was spoken proudly and scornfully, with all the pride and scorn of a pure and truthful nature, but it was a foolish speech to have made, because it provoked the woman to whom it was spoken, and drove her into reprisals. It turned her from a friend into an enemy, and Sophy as an enemy was not a desirable person.

She could have forgiven almost everything short of a blow to her vanity, but to such women vanity stands in the place of heart.

She was instantly at her very worst.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"You poor girl," she murmured, gently, "and do you, indeed, really believe that Claude Trafford is a 'good man.' What do you know about him that could possibly induce you to form such an opinion of him? if you knew what there is against him——"

"I know nothing against him. I will hear nothing against him," cried Marvie, warmly, "tell me nothing to his disparagement—I will not listen."

"Not even to *facts*, my dear Marvie? Oh, but yes, I think I must make you listen; it is but right that you should know."

"If there is anything I ought to know, he will tell it me himself," retorted the girl stoutly; "do you not understand that he is mine, and I am his. No one can come between us."

"What—not even his wife? his wife who lives still, and who surely has the first claim upon a man."

For a moment there was silence. The room seemed to go round; a sensation as of an ice-hand gripped at her throat. She pressed her fingers against her neck; it seemed as if the words would not come. Yet they were spoken quietly enough at last.

"I do not believe you. It is a lie."

Lady Wishaw shrugged her shoulders. "Ask him yourself, then," she said, carelessly, reaching out her hand towards some letters that lay on the table. "Of course, if you think you know better

than I—who have known Claude Trafford for ten years, during which time he has frequently laid bare his whole heart and story to me; if you know more of him than I do, that is well and good. You can ask him about what I tell you yourself.”

“I cannot,” she answered, in a choked voice, and the tears came into her eyes; “I do not know where he is.”

“Well, then. don’t you think, on the whole, you had better listen to me? Sit down, my dear Marvie; don’t let us quarrel about a man, it’s such bad form. Bad woman as you think me, I assure you I have no ill-feeling against you, and, really, I should be sincerely sorry to see you come to grief. You look as if you were going to faint now; *do* sit down.”

Marvie sank back limply into the chair behind her. She did, indeed, feel faint, and her limbs trembled; and, moreover, she must know—of that she felt certain.

Lady Wishaw was handling her letters—some bills and invitation notes that had come by the second post. She was apparently in no hurry. She was going to make Marvie suffer—Marvie, who had dared to tell her that she was a bad wife, and she meant thoroughly to enjoy the sight of her suffering.

“When Claude Trafford was twenty-one,” she said at last, fixing her eyes on her victim, “he lived with his father up in the north of England. His mother died when he was an infant, and he had no brothers or sisters. His father seems to

have been an autocratic old person, and his son stood in considerable awe of him. They lived together in one of those old border towers, of which there are so many in the hilly districts that lie between England and Scotland. It was a desolate country, and there were at that time only two neighbors—the clergyman of the parish, whose wife had just died in her first confinement, and a retired wealthy Newcastle manufacturer, who had recently purchased a large rambling mansion within five miles of the Border Tower. The manufacturer was ambitious, and old Trafford was impecunious, and between them they fixed up a marriage for poor Claude with Miss Manufacturer. She was five years older than himself, rather handsome, and blessed with a violent temper, but her money-bags were fat and full, and Claude does not seem to have made any serious objection to the scheme.”

“He did not love her, then?”

“Oh, dear, no. You can extract what consolation you like out of *that*; he certainly did not love her, but he liked the thought of her money very much. Anyhow, he married her fast enough, and the bereaved parson duly tied the knot in the village church. And a week later Mrs. Trafford’s ‘temper’ developed itself under its rightful name, for she went stark, staring mad—and it speedily transpired that her mother and several other members of her mother’s family had died in the Newcastle lunatic asylum. She is mad still.”

"Where is she?"

"Up at Trafford Castle—the Border Tower, you know. Old Trafford has been dead for years, and the manufacturer washed his hands of his mad daughter as long as he lived. He did, however, leave her all his money in trust to her husband as long as she is alive, and with a life interest in it after her death. The interesting maniac has never recovered her wits. She is shut up in the Border Tower with her keeper, and naturally poor Claude does *not* live himself in the home of his fathers."

"What an awful fate!" murmured Marvie. Somehow her own part in the tragedy of this man's life seemed lost in the greater horror of this terrible story.

"For Claude, do you mean?" asked Sophy, lightly. "Oh, well, I don't know that he is to be pitied. He has got lots of money, you see, and he manages to enjoy his life very much—the poor mad creature isn't in the least in his way. On the rare occasions when he has to go up to Northumberland to look after the place, he lives, I believe, in rooms in another part of the house, and never sees his mad wife at all, though, he tells me, he has occasionally heard her screams; she is rather violent at times."

"She might die, and then he would be released," said Marvie, in a suffocated voice.

"Oh, it's not particularly to his interest that she should die. It would make no difference to him. By the terms of his marriage settlement,

and also of his father-in-law's will he cannot marry again."

"Why?" asked Marvie, sharply, throwing up her head.

"Because if he marries again, he loses every penny of the money. It all goes away, then, to a distant cousin of his wife's. So, you see, the poor thing might just as well go on living."

"And you think—you suppose—you imagine that Mr. Trafford would be so base and mercenary—?"

Sophy nodded, with a little laugh.

"I think, I suppose, and I imagine, as you say, just that! Claude Trafford would not give up that money, which he loves with all his heart, for any woman upon the face of the earth. You see, I know him better than you do, Marvie, dear. Put him out of your head, he is a hopeless detrimental! all very well to flirt with married women, you see, but you girls get your wings singed in that candle—it isn't safe; he ought to have let you alone, he ought to have known better; and you are not the first either."

"Not the first?" repeated poor Marvie, blankly.

"Not the first girl, I mean, whom the wretch has made love to; it's a great shame of him, I always tell him."

"Who was she?" gasped Marvie.

"Oh—only that parson's daughter up in Northumberland, the one who was an infant at the time of his marriage. Naturally she knew nothing about it; nobody ever told her that there was a

mad woman shut up in the tower of Trafford Castle. And one year, when Claude went up there, he had to stay longer than usual, and he had nothing much to do with his leisure hours, and the parson's girl had grown up and was rather pretty, I imagine, or he would not have troubled his head about her. Anyhow, he found it very pleasant to make love to her. He makes love nicely, doesn't he?"

Marvie writhed.

"It didn't go on very long. He told me all about it, you see—all but her name; he said he couldn't in honor mention *that*. Unluckily, her father died, and then, poor little silly, she thought that, of course, Claude would marry her. She had been meeting him on the sly, you see, and he had to tell her the truth."

"And then?"

"Oh, then, of course, he went away. I really think he behaved rather well to her, for he actually offered to take her away with him and set her up in a little house of her own in London. But she had a fierce attack of virtue, and refused point blank—so he had to leave her."

"Where is she now?"

"He has no idea—dead probably. I have only told you the story, so that you may see for yourself what a mistake you have made in imagining yourself to be engaged to him. Put him out of your head, my dear Marvie—go home and forget him. There's no harm done, you see."

"None whatever," she assented, humbly.

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"I am sure you will forgive me for having told you the truth, my dear girl; you will see that I have been actuated by the kindest motives, won't you?"

"I am sure you have. Good-bye, Sophy."

"Why, you are not going, are you; won't you stay and have some tea?"

"Not to-day, I think."

And then she went.

"I don't believe she cares much, after all," said Lady Wishaw, rather regretfully to herself, as she watched Marvie's slender figure glide away down the avenue on her bicycle. "I thought she'd have raved or fainted. I should have enjoyed that. But she took it all without turning a hair. No heart, I suppose."

CHAPTER XV.

FRESH TROUBLE.

MARVIE MATHURIN'S whole world had come tumbling down about her ears. Love, faith, hope, everything seemed to be engulfed in one general ruin. Life itself was shattered, for there seemed to be nothing left to live for. Yet, oddly enough, in the first shock of that terrible chaos, it was not so much upon herself and her own agony that her thoughts dwelt, but rather upon that other pitiful story out of her lover's past history that had been been incidentally revealed to her.

That poor girl! Across the intervening years Marvie's heart went out to her in boundless sympathy. She was her fellow-sufferer, that poor little 'parson's daughter,' as Lady Wishaw had called her, who had loved Claude Trafford too, and who, like herself, had been betrayed and abandoned! All the way home—and she rode every mile of the way, for she had forgotten all about the trains, and just pedalled mechanically on, uphill and downhill, in the direction of home, just as a dog who is lost sets his face instinctively homewards—and for all those twenty miles over hill and dale, Marvie Mathurin thought about that unknown girl. She wished she knew what had become of her—

Whether she was, as Sophy had said she was, probably dead, or whether she lived still somewhere in the world, hiding the wounds of her broken heart as best she could. She had been a good girl, that 'parson's girl.' She had not yielded to the dire temptation which the man she loved had held out to her when he had told her that he would take her away, but that he could not marry her.

Would the same temptation be offered to herself?—and, if so, how would it be with her?

Marvie shivered, and she prayed to God, as she rode, that Claude Trafford might never so tempt her.

"It will be better for me never to see him again," she said to herself aloud, as though to give herself heart and courage. "I pray God that I may never see him again."

But her innermost heart did not echo that prayer. For love cannot be killed at a blow, and not all the pride and wounded purity of a high-spirited woman can suffice to extinguish it; and though Marvie was both proud and high-spirited, she was not strong—not like that other, whose story was so like her own.

In vain did she try to dwell upon the insult this man had offered to her in winning her heart when he had no right to do so; in vain did she endeavor to lash her soul into righteous anger against him. She could think of nothing but his smile, and conjure up no other memory but the murmur of his tender words and looks. And yet,

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deep down in her heart lay the conviction that she had, in some way, been aware all along that her love-story was doomed to end in disaster.

The secrecy, the stolen meetings, and the hidden letters—all had filled her throughout with vague misgivings, whilst he himself had never ceased to arouse in her that singular mingling of repulsion and attraction that had somehow rendered her uneasy from the very first.

"I should have been safer with Ray," she thought now. Yet she knew that Ray could never have awakened in her that delirium of passion, half joy, half fear, which rendered Claude Trafford so absolutely irresistible.

And again the witchery of the man's words and looks came back over her in an overwhelming flood.

Ah! was it possible that this terrible story could be true? Could he, indeed, be so false? Was it not far more likely that Sophy Wishaw had romanced, or even deliberately lied to her? How hard she tried to believe in him still. With what subtle arguments did she not struggle to delude herself! Had not Sophy always been fond of twisting the truth to suit herself? Was it not more than likely that a bitter jealousy of herself had driven her into a malicious invention of all these damaging things against Trafford? Could she not be brave and true, and trust him in spite of all?

But to some natures doubt is equivalent to disbelief, and Marvie, who, with all her faults, was as honest and straightforward as the day, had

never recovered from the revulsion of feeling which Trafford's demand for secrecy had from the first aroused in her. He had fascinated her and had overpowered her reason, but perhaps he had never from that moment really commanded her respect. Obedience to his orders had been hard to her, and no sooner was she out of his presence than doubts and uncertainties had assailed her in myriads. She remembered all this now with a shudder. Had not her instincts of right and wrong been outraged from the very first? How was it possible that she could trust him now! more especially as every detail of Sophy Wishaw's horrible story had dovetailed only too well in with the uncomprehended broken links which he himself had placed in her hands.

The secrecy, the mystery of 'family complications' with which he had bewildered her, the obstinacy with which he had refused to come to her home or visit her father, all this seemed now to be comprehensible. He had not been free to woo her, because he had a wife alive. She knew, with a horrible conviction, that this thing must be true, and that Lady Wishaw's story was not very far wrong.

Distracted by all these harrowing thoughts, and with a heart that ached with miserable pain and bitter mortification, it was small wonder that Marvie's face, as she entered her father's house, should reflect the tumult and anguish of her feelings.

As she closed the hall-door behind her, she be-

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came instantly aware of some unwonted agitation in the house. Edna, who was not given to receive her stepdaughter with any demonstration of feeling, came flying across the hall to meet her.

"Oh, thank God you have come!" she cried. "I have been watching for you for the last two hours, dear Marvie. I have bad news for you; but surely you know already!"—glancing into the girl's drawn and haggard face. "I see you must have heard!"

"Heard—what? For Heaven's sake, Mrs. Mathurin," she cried, irritably, as she threw her gloves down upon the hall table, "do try to be coherent! Is anything the matter?"

Then Edna perceived that the pale and grief-stricken face was due to other causes. "Yes, I am grieved to tell you that Lady Lareston is very ill. She had a kind of seizure just after lunch. She was unconscious at first, but has recovered her senses now, and she keeps on asking and praying for you, Marvie."

Marvie ran towards the staircase. She loved her grandmother better than any other of her relations, and Edna's words upset her terribly.

"You have sent for the doctor, of course?"

"Oh, yes. Dr. Barker has been here three times. He is coming again, and I have telegraphed—by his wish—for Sir Joseph Price from town. I sent a telegram to your father also, of course, but I fear he has not received it. He was to be away, I know, on business. Ray might be at the office and send it on to him."

They had reached the door of the old lady's bedroom.

Marvie turned round with her hand on the door-handle. Her whispered questions were strangely broken and trembling.

"Is—she altered?"

"A little, dear, not very much."

"Will she know me?"

"Oh, yes."

"Will she die?"

Edna bent her head.

"I cannot say; Dr. Barker hopes not. But she is old, and for the present her life is in great danger. Shall I come in with you?"

"No thank you, Mrs. Mathurin."

She went into the room and closed the door behind her.

Somehow there had been a *rapprochement* between the two women during those brief whispered questions and answers. Young Mrs. Mathurin went slowly down-stairs to wait for the doctors, and to long for her husband's return.

She had no particular cause to love the old woman who lay dying up-stairs, yet the presence of death in a house always brings its own special lesson to a thoughtful mind—and then, Mrs. Mathurin's heart ached for Marvie. No one knew, save herself, how much she desired to win Marvie's love and goodwill, and now she longed to comfort her, yet feared to offer an unwelcome sympathy. Her quick intuitions had divined that already to-day some great distress, that must be

wholly unconnected with her grandmother's illness, had swept across Marvie Mathurin's life. Her pallor, her haggard eyes, the pinched lines around her mouth, all pointed to some great mental disturbance; and, knowing what she knew, Mrs. Mathurin had no difficulty in guessing from what source Marvie's sorrow had come. She had no idea where her stepdaughter had spent her day. It was possible that she had been with Claude Trafford; if so, she must have discovered something of the man's nature and methods. Yet Trafford had promised Edna with almost his last words, that he would go away, and not approach Marvie again until he could do so openly and honestly. But was he to be trusted? and were his promises likely to be kept? Edna could not help feeling sure that his good faith in the matter would probably depend exactly upon his own inclinations and desires.

Poor Marvie! Edna, as she paced backwards and forwards across the hall, glancing frequently at the clock, and often at the timetable of the trains that lay open upon the oak chest, wished, with all her heart, that she knew how to help her husband's daughter in the trouble and sorrow that seemed closing in upon her on every side.

As it was, there was nothing for her to do at present but to wait. She was not wanted in Lady Lareston's sick-room. The old woman had called out angrily to her to go away, when she had recovered sufficiently to notice her presence at

her bedside. And rude and angry words had been flung at her.

"I don't want you!" she had cried, scowling at her. "I want my own child, my Marvie. I want no designing interlopers here. Go and find Marvie. Why doesn't she come. Are you keeping her away from me. Go and bring her, I tell you—go!"

And Edna had gone. There was no getting over such hatred and prejudice, and, much as she would have liked to be of use to the poor old lady in her dire extremity, she recognized at once the impossibility of doing so. As Dr. Barker told her, her presence only excited Lady Lareston injuriously. So all she could do was to wait.

Once she went up to the nursery to see her child, and to impress upon the nurse that he must be prevented from making a noise. And little Jack's outstretched arms and chuckles of delight at her entrance went far to wipe out the memory of the old lady's cruel and unjust revilings. At least she was not unloved! But she could not stay long with Jack. At any moment she might be wanted down-stairs. As she passed Lady Lareston's door on her way to the hall, she paused for a few moments to listen. There was no sound from within the room, save the heavy unhealthy breathing of the sick woman, and just once a low heart-breaking murmur as of subdued sobbing. Then she heard Lady Lareston's maid come in from the dressing-room, and the sound of weeping ceased.

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What passed between the dying woman and the girl, to whom her life had been one long devotion of twenty years, was never known. Marvie never spoke of that farewell.

Dr. Barker came again, and went up to the sickroom. And, half-an-hour later Arthur Mathurin, and Ray, and the London physician all arrived together—but they were too late. Dr. Barker met them in the hall with the news that all was over. Lady Lareston had had a second stroke, and passed away whilst still unconscious, within a quarter-of-an-hour, in the presence of himself and the maid, and of her heart-broken granddaughter.

CHAPTER XVI.

A PRELIMINARY SKIRMISH.

ARTHUR MATHURIN and his wife were wandering together round the rose garden, which now, in the second week of June, was rapidly nearing its fullest glory of the first bloom of flower.

It was a week since Lady Lareston had been laid to rest in the family vault, between the late Earl, her husband, and her daughter, the unfortunate Lady Marvel. A funeral is a terrible and depressing affair, even when great personal grief cannot be reckoned amongst its chief characteristics ; and it is certain that, with the exception of Marvie, nobody sorrowed very deeply for the defunct lady. Marvie had stayed at home, and Mr. Mathurin and his nephew, together with a couple of Monasters, distant cousins of the late Earl, had been the only relatives who had stood beside the old lady's open grave.

Ray was sorry too, certainly, for Lady Lareston had always been kind to him, and Marvie's grief, which appeared to be overwhelming, made him sorrier still. He told himself that he had not realized before the depth of feeling of which Marvie was capable.

But when he said this to young Mrs. Mathurin,

she had made no answer, and Ray had felt unaccountably annoyed by her silence. Nobody did justice to Marvie, thought her eager young lover—nobody but himself, and the poor old granny who was no longer there to pet and spoil her, and, though he had often remonstrated against that same petting and spoiling, yet now that she was gone he regretted the foolish old lady for Marvie's sake.

But as for Arthur Mathurin, no sooner was all that terrible ceremonial of woe at an end—no sooner were the mourners and the mourning coaches and all the funeral trappings cleared away, the blinds drawn up, and the fresh odors of the summer air let in in a wholesome flood through the house, than he drew, as it were, long breaths of relief and satisfaction.

For long years he had done his duty to his first wife's mother—had housed and clothed and fed her, treating her with honor and consideration, and she had rewarded him by an unjust persecution of his second wife, and by poisoning the mind of his daughter against her stepmother.

"I can't help it," he was saying now to Edna, as he wandered with her down the grassy path beneath a Pergola of Rêve d'or and Allan Richardson roses. "I can't pretend to be very sorry, when I consider how unkind she was to you, my darling."

"Oh, but, Arthur—it was natural enough surely; she remembered her own daughter, and she could not help looking upon me as the usurper of her place."

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"What rubbish! was I never to marry again? Besides, as you and I know very well, Edna, poor Lady Marvel was never dear to me—as you are."

Edna sighed a little. Mr. Mathurin passed his arm round her little waist and drew her nearer to him. At that moment they caught a glimpse of the nurse with the child in her arms as she passed across the end of the rose-garlanded arcade, and Arthur Mathurin felt that he had his wife and child and his home again all to himself, and that nothing was wanting now to complete his happiness, save one thing—one thing only.

"I could grieve more for the old lady if she had not set Marvie against you," he said. "She always spoilt the girl, utterly, and, no doubt, she encouraged her in unkindness to you; but now that evil influence is gone, your sweet goodness must surely win Marvie's heart."

Edna laughed a little. "I doubt if 'sweet goodness,' even if it be one of my attributes, Arthur, ever won anyone's heart."

"Then she must marry. I won't have my Edna's life troubled by my rebellious daughter. As soon as it's decent, after her grandmother's death, I shall insist on this marriage taking place; it can be as quiet as she pleases—the quieter the better as far as I am concerned; but Ray can afford to marry now, and they can live in London quite comfortably. I shall speak to Marvie to-day about it, and I shall tell Ray to propose to her."

"*Pray* don't, Arthur," cried Edna, earnestly. "I am certain you will only meet with absolute

failure if you do. Marvie will refuse him utterly if he speaks now ; his only chance is to wait."

"Why should she refuse him?" queried her husband, irritably; "they are always together, as thick as thieves. She can't say she doesn't know him well enough. What on earth is there to wait for?"

And Edna did not dare to reply that Marvie's mind was, at present, too full of another lover—a lover, too, who had said he had no power to offer her marriage—to be likely to listen to Ray's proposals.

If only Marvie could be given time, she might recover from this mad infatuation; till then, Ray would do wiser to hold his tongue.

If young Mrs. Mathurin had only taken her husband into her confidence; if she had told him the truth as she had discovered it, bravely and openly, much after sorrow would have been spared to her and to others, but she shrank, perhaps not unnaturally, from the mention of Claude Trafford's name. She could not speak of him without dragging up her own past connection with him, and years ago she had sworn to herself that she would bury that old story forever and ever, and speak of it to no one.

When she had first married, she had debated the question long and anxiously to herself, and she had decided to be silent. If Arthur Mathurin had loved her less ardently and absorbingly, she might, perhaps, have told him.

But his great love raised a barrier between them

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which she could not surmount. He firmly believed that she had never loved anyone save himself, and although he knew very well that her love did not equal his own—for he often rallied her half-playfully upon her coldness and lack of emotion—yet he never suspected that Edna was capable of the fire of a great passion, and that such a flame had, in fact, burnt once fiercely and furiously in her heart. Edna knew that to discover this would be a very terrible shock to him, and her great gratitude to him for his goodness to her had decided her to the less difficult alternative of silence concerning her past. She could not bring herself to cause him sorrow and disturbance by what had seemed, at the time, to be an unnecessary revelation.

Had she known how one day his daughter would run the risk of being drawn into the very same whirlpool that had nearly wrecked her own life, Edna might possibly have decided differently; but it is not given to any of us to foresee the future, and a more unlikely development of fate could hardly have been conceived. And now, after two years of marriage, of mutual trust and affection between herself and her husband, to go back upon that old story—the telling of which must astonish and distress him so much—seemed to her to be an utter impossibility.

So she decided in her own mind that Marvie must be saved by herself alone.

“Do me a kindness, Arthur,” she pleaded, twining her hands about his arm as they walked;

"leave me to manage Marvie, and do not be impatient. She is not in the very least bit in love with Ray now, and to urge her to marry him would only rouse her to opposition and rebellion, but the time may come when she may learn to value his faithful affection. I am certain that Marvie is to be led, but never to be driven, and just now she is upset and unhappy. It would be folly if Ray were to speak now.

"Well, they are together now at this moment; perhaps Ray will have taken the law into his own hands."

"I sincerely hope not, for his own sake, but even if so, that is another matter, promise me that you, at least, won't interfere?"

As Arthur Mathurin never could refuse anything that Edna asked of him, it is needless to say that he granted the required promise.

"As long as the girl doesn't make your life a burden to you, my darling."

"Oh, she won't do that. I am going to get on with her very well soon, and I am very, very sorry for her," she added, earnestly.

Meanwhile, in the upper morning room which she and granny had so long shared together, but which was now by tacit consent given over entirely to Miss Mathurin, Ray and Marvie were going through a scene which was characteristic of them both.

"I don't mean to pretend that I don't love you, Marvie, but I am not asking you to marry me," said Ray.

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"I am glad of that, for I should certainly refuse you."

"As I haven't asked you, is not that rather a premature remark to make?"

"Perhaps so. But to be forewarned is to be forearmed."

"I am quite forewarned, thanks. All the same, as I love you, I want to know what is making you so wretched?"

"Is not dear granny's death a sufficient explanation?" replied Marvie, and her beautiful eyes filled with tears.

"Ah, that is a very good reason for everybody else, Marvie, but it won't do for me. You were wretched and completely altered long before your grandmother died. Directly you came back from the Wishaws, I could see there was something wrong with you; don't you remember I spoke to you about it?"

"After a little pause, Marvie said: "I remember you made some foolish remarks to me one day. That doesn't prove much, does it?"

"I don't want 'proof,' Marvie, I want your confidence," he answered, wistfully.

She sprang impatiently from her chair. "Don't be silly!" she said, then took to her old trick of prancing up and down the room.

Ray waited. When Marvie began to tramp, her tongue was invariably loosened; he knew her so well, better than anyone else in the world. Most people only knew the worst of Marvie, but Ray knew the best as well as the worst. Her

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snub did not alarm him. He waited patiently, turning the pages of a photograph album, that lay on the table at his side, absently over.

Presently Marvie came up behind his chair and laid a hand on each of his shoulders. Ray sat quite still, his eyes fixed upon an early photograph of Arthur Mathurin, taken in the sixties, with full side whiskers. He contemplated this specimen of art immovably. He knew better than to turn round, but the pressure of her soft hand upon his shoulders sent irrational little thrills of delight through his dancing pulses.

"Dear old boy, I am a beast to you, am I not?" Marvie's voice shook a little, but Ray's was perfectly cold and calm as he made answer:

"Rather, I think."

"I know I am, and I cannot help it—that's the worst of it. You must let me alone, Ray. I wish, oh! how I wish it could be as you want!"

"Do you, Marvie?" he said, quickly; "then if so, why not?"

"Because it's impossible, utterly impossible. I can't explain; only try to be patient with me, Ray, dear."

"Am I not always patient with you, Marvie?"

"I know—I know—but I am afraid I shall try you very highly, and then you will be angry with me and hate me."

"I am not very likely to do that."

"Promise me, that whatever I do, you will never, never leave off being my friend?"

"That goes without saying, Marvie, though,

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to be sure, *friend* is hardly the right name for it."

"Yes, but it must be. I only want your friendship, Ray ; don't—don't spoil it by trying to make it anything else. Have we not always been pals? Be my pal still, and if—if—I should be in any trouble ever, will you stand by me just the same?"

"Of course I shall, Marvie. You needn't be afraid of *that*. But what is this mysterious 'trouble' you are going to get into? Won't you tell me a little more about it?"

She withdrew her hands quickly from his shoulders, and began pacing up and down the room again.

"There is nothing—nothing at all," she said, in a queer little choked voice.

Then Ray looked up and followed her with his eyes. For the first time he experienced a vague uneasiness about her. There was something he could not understand—some new influence at work in her, the clue to which he which he could not guess. The suggestion of mystery in her words was disquieting. Was anyone trying to injure her, he wondered? What malign element could have entered into her life unknown to the members of her family? Here was certainly more than the natural sorrow over the death of her old grandmother.

For some moments he watched her without speaking. She seemed excited as well as distressed. It was not so much grief as a harrowing anxiety that he could read upon her face.

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"My dear girl," he said at last, quietly and reasonably, no longer the lover, but rather the brother or the friend; "I do wish you would lay aside your very stupid and causeless prejudice against Mrs. Mathurin, and take her into your confidence."

Marvie stopped short and gasped.

"Good heavens! what an idea. Why on earth do you say that?"

"Because it seems to me that what you badly need is not the friendship of a mere man, but the warm help and sympathy of a nice good woman."

"And you think that Mrs. Mathurin——"

"I am quite sure of it. That little woman is of sterling gold, Marvie, and you will live to find it out some day."

The proud head was flung back in scorn.

"And you want me to open my arms and my heart to a girl younger than myself, a designing nobody who schemed to catch my poor father, and has done her best to cut me out of his affection?"

"You are very unjust, Marvie. Edna is quite incapable of such conduct. I believe she would give anything on earth if you would be friends with her. If you want a good friend, go to her and see."

For some reason or other Marvie made no direct answer; she became rather thoughtful, and it struck her as rather a curious development of her own thoughts when Ray said, energetically—

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"If you'd make a friend of your father's wife, instead of that horrid, heartless, selfish, bad form little woman, Sophy Wishaw, it would be the better and happier for yourself and for all of us."

And Marvie—queer mixture of good and bad, as she always was—promptly made an unexpected reply.

"I am quite sure of that, Ray. Only, for heaven's sake, *don't preach!*" and with a laugh that had, somehow, no trace about it of the distress and disturbance that had been so evident during the whole of the interview, she kissed the tips of her fingers gaily back to him and left the room.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN INTERVAL OF CALM.

So Ray had gained nothing by an interview to which, it may be mentioned, he had looked forward with almost feverish eagerness, save one more disheartening rebuff, and the superadded consciousness of some intangible barrier, which he could neither surmount nor comprehend, between himself and the girl he loved.

He went back to town by the usual after-breakfast train in the morning, and he had no opportunity for farewell words with her before he left. Marvie was late; she came down the staircase just as he was starting; and a hurried shake of the hand as he was following his uncle across the hall to the dogcart was all that passed between them.

But with Mrs. Mathurin he had exchanged a few words earlier, whilst they stood together for a few moments before breakfast on the terrace outside the dining-room window.

Edna's regret was patent in the eyes she turned upon him. There was such a perfect understanding between these two people, that there never seemed to be any occasion for many words.

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"What is it?" said Ray to her in answer to the look in her eyes; "do you understand?"

She shook her head a little, and her eyebrows took an upward lift.

"I believe you know—could tell me if you would?" he persisted.

"One cannot always tell things one thinks," she answered, rather vaguely. "I can only say one thing to you, Ray, and that I say emphatically—*wait*."

"Have I not always waited?" replied the young man, not impatiently, but with infinite sadness. His hands were stuffed deep into his pockets—an attitude which seems to give a certain strength to the mind masculine; whilst his eyes looked out over the broad lawn and its clustering roses.

"Well, you can wait a little longer then," retorted Edna, cheerfully. "Time does a lot sometimes, and you mustn't get tired."

Then Ray turned round and looked at her. "Look here, Edna, don't you ever suppose I shall get tired; I am not in the least likely to change about Marvie; I don't care how long I have to wait, or whether we are both old before the time comes, I shall always be the same about her—if only I can win her in the long run."

"And I think you will win her, Ray," said Edna, softly laying her hand for a moment on his coat sleeve; "with time and patience, only I am afraid you may have to suffer, and, perhaps, to forgive!"

"Do you think I mind that?" There is nothing I would not suffer for her, and nothing—nothing on the face of the earth that I would not forgive her."

"Are you not coming in to breakfast?" cried the master of the house, at the open French window behind them. "Look sharp, Ray, we have only got ten minutes to eat in. Come and give us our tea, Edna."

So there were no more confidences. But Edna remembered Ray's last words, and thought over them much and often. And she thought that he guessed, although neither of them had put it into words, that some other lover stood for a time, between himself and Marvie.

When the infatuation was over, Edna believed that Marvie's heart would find its true level, and right itself. Already the cure might possibly have begun, for she did not think that the girl had seen Claude Trafford again, and disenchantment must necessarily set in if she believed herself to be forgotten or neglected.

She remembered her own hard-fought battle, and knew, that though bruised and maimed, she had come forth victorious from the fight. Marvie, who was so proud and sensitive, was surely capable of as much.

The days went by uneventfully for the next two weeks. Ray did not come down for the Sundays. Mr. Mathurin went up to town nearly every day; there was some extra work at the office and he took fewer holidays than usual. So, for

the most part, the two young women were left to each other's society. Without any actual *rap-prochement* between them, there was, nevertheless, a distinct diminution of antagonistic elements in their intercourse with each other. Lady Lareston's death had undoubtedly allayed much of the ill-feeling which, by her injudicious prejudice towards one, and unwise partiality to the other, she had fanned into angry flame. Edna and Marvie met now, if somewhat silently, yet in a more peaceful spirit.

Moreover, Marvie was plainly unhappy, and Edna, divining at the causes of her unhappiness, was able, with the exquisite tact and forethought that was part of herself, to turn aside and render harmless many little pin-pricks of daily worry which might have wounded and pained her. Marvie was vaguely aware of this, and a certain recognition of her stepmother's shielding care of her came slowly into her mind.

On one occasion it was Arthur Mathurin's old aunt, who had written to propose herself for the day. Mrs. George Mathurin was a gossiping old bore who lived in London; her bi-annual visits to her nephew's country house were justly dreaded by its inmates. Marvie hated her.

"Why can't father stop at home to receive her?" she said, petulantly, throwing the letter across to Edna.

"Your father is so very busy this week."

"Aunt George perfectly maddens me!" cried

the girl. "Oh, can't we make some excuse and put her off?"

"She would only suggest another day the following week," replied Edna, with a smile. "We had much better get her over at her own date."

"She is so horridly inquisitive, always cross-questions me as to why I am not married, and when I mean to get a husband."

"Well, I will answer her questions. She won't get much out of me. You need not be there, Marvie; ride off on your bicycle and lunch with the Damers or the Wilsons, or some of the neighbors; they would, any of them, be glad to see you, and I can tell Aunt George that you had an engagement, and entertain her myself."

"Oh, do you really think I could?—would it do?—won't she bore you very much?"

"Dreadfully, but I shall survive it. Besides, I feel sure she is principally coming to see how Jack is being brought up. She thinks I don't feed him properly, and her main object is to lecture me on the subject."

"You are very good about it, Mrs. Mathurin," said Marvie, after a little pause; and then she looked her young stepmother fully in the face, and added a soft-breathed "thank you, so much!" before she left the room.

Marvie had at least looked at her! Edna remembered the days of averted eyes, and was thankful! She was as good as her word concerning the visit of the unpopular old aunt, whom Marvie escaped altogether, and whose matrimonial

inquiries concerning her great-niece were poured freely into Edna's ears. Young Mrs. Mathurin was very dense, and could give her no satisfactory answer to her questions, which, indeed, she pretended not to understand.

"A stupid little woman," said Aunt George to herself, as she went back in the train to town, laden with roses from her nephew's garden. "Arthur certainly seems to have made a most foolish marriage. A nobody, with neither looks nor brains!—she is bringing up that child, too, most unwisely—no proper discipline, and sweets at all hours; and I must say my great-niece might have shown a little more consideration for me than to be out the whole afternoon! Frivolous, flighty girl!" Nevertheless Aunt George had enjoyed her day on the whole, and was glad to have brought away such a beautiful basket full of roses.

"Mrs. Arthur Mathurin does not improve at all on acquaintance," she announced on her return to her companion, a much down-trodden 'poor relation' of her own. "I find her quite uninteresting, and, as I suspected, quite without any proper theories on the nurture and education of children! It is, however, a pretty place, and the air has done me good. Arrange these flowers at once please, Eliza." And Eliza did so, meekly.

Young Mrs. Mathurin saved Marvie from other irritating people as well as from Aunt George. There were the vicarage people, who were forever dropping in; the new tenants at the cottage by the mill; the son of the Squire of a

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neighboring parish, who was a shy and sheepish admirer to whom Marvie had never given anything but frowns and cross words. Edna seemed to stand always between her and these tiresome people nowadays—carrying them off out of her way to see the rose garden or the conservatory, so that she was able to escape and avoid the gossip and chatter which jarred so much upon the raw wounds of her heart.

So the days went on peacefully, and not altogether without their consolations, and Edna, watching her anxiously, said to herself that the worst was over, and that Trafford had kept his word, and would trouble her no more. And then, all at once, just as she was congratulating herself upon this satisfactory state of things, there came a sudden change.

She met Marvie one evening coming in at the open front door from her daily afternoon ride, and at the very first look at her she could see that something out of the common had happened.

The girl's face glowed like a warm jewel under the dark setting of her hair and heavy black-trimmed hat. It was as though the hand of life itself had been swept across it. Her eyes shone with an indescribable brightness; the red rose-tints upon her cheek were beautiful with the inimitable brush of happiness; her very step was buoyant; a new-found joy irradiated from her whole being.

Edna Mathurin said to herself: "He has come back, and she has seen him!"

That evening when dinner was over, and the garden was wrapped in the dewy darkness of a July night, Edna saw Marvie slip out at the open window with a black lace shawl wrapped mantilla-wise about her head.

She would have followed her, but her husband called her. He wanted her in his study; he had things to say to her, letters to show her. He had a much-dreaded contingency, which had been haunting his mind for some weeks, to make known to her. A wife's first duty is to her husband; she was bound to listen, to read, to sympathize, to be very patient, too, whilst he unfolded to her his fears and his doubts; and then he asked her advice on sundry points, and took it, or more generally declined it, after argument, as the case might be.

And so more than half-an-hour went by, and, glancing hopelessly at the clock when at last she was free, Edna felt that it was too late to save the situation that night, whatever it might be.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FRIENDS AT LAST.

ARTHUR MATHURIN, to his very great annoyance, found himself obliged to go over to New York on business. There was a talk of starting an American branch in connection with 'Mathurin & Son,' a step which would add largely in the end to the profits of the business, but which of course, necessitated a personal arrangement between the members of the English firm and the proposed American partner. In order to bring the negotiations to a successful issue, it was most desirable that one of the English partners should go over to inquire into the project, to sign agreements, and to lend the stamp of his personal authority to the new undertaking.

And, somehow, it seemed that Arthur Mathurin himself was not only the most fitting person to go, but was also, owing to pressure of work, the only one who could be spared.

He did not like going at all. He did not want to be separated from his wife and child, nor to leave his beloved garden just when the roses were at their fullest glory. But duty is duty, and an Englishman seldom puts personal inclination before it. So, having made up his mind that

go he must, he set to work to complete his preparations for the journey as promptly as he could.

"The sooner I go, the sooner I shall get back to you," he said to his wife, and Edna acquiesced almost in silence.

She was dreadfully sorry. Not at all because of the sentimental reasons which he experienced, for personally the prospect of a brief separation from her husband was almost a relief to her, so oppressive, sometimes, did she find the constant expression of a love to which she never quite knew how to make an adequate response. Her regrets arose from a different motive altogether, and had nothing to do with herself.

She and the boy would be all right. Edna was perfectly able to take care of herself and of him. She had plenty of occupation, and was not in the least afraid of being dull—for, after all, it is only brainless people who are really dull. Moreover, she had a very sensible theory, that separations between married folk are, on the whole, entirely beneficial; they clear the atmosphere of little rubs and misunderstandings, and the subsequent reunion after such absences awakens, not infrequently, a delightful renewal of confidence and affection.

Edna's misgivings were wholly on Marvie's account. She had an intuitive perception that Marvie was in some way at a crisis of her life, and that the responsibility to herself might, perhaps, be a heavier one than she ought to undertake with-

out the possibility of an appeal, if the worst came to the worst, to a superior authority. More than once she wished that she had confided her doubts and anxieties to her husband—yet it did not seem possible or desirable to do so now. Arthur had quite enough on his mind without adding to his worries and troubles in so serious a manner.

He had only a few days in which to complete his preparations and there were a great many harassing business matters to be settled, and a great deal of work and fatigue to be gone through before the day of his departure came, whilst Edna was fully employed in packing his clothes and in making sundry necessary purchases for him in London.

She went up to town and saw him off at Euston on the day he left London for Liverpool, and his last words to her as he strained her to his heart were—

“For God’s sake, keep well, my darling, and if you are in any trouble, or want money or help of any kind, send to Ray at once.”

She promised that she would do so, and felt herself to be a brute because she could not even pretend to cry whilst she watched the train glide slowly out of the station, whereas she had seen that her husband’s eyes had looked at her, at the last, through a mist of miserable tears.

Yet her heart was heavy enough for all that, as she turned away and got into the hansom that Ray had secured for her. He saw her across London to Waterloo, and into her train.

"You will let me know, won't you, Edna, if you would like me to come down?" he said, rather wistfully, as he lingered by the door of the railway carriage.

"Yes, of course. But I don't think it would be wise at present. You best further your cause just now by staying away."

"I wasn't really thinking of—her, then, but of you. I want to be of use to you, if I can, whilst my uncle is away."

"So you shall be, if I want you. I promise you that. I shall send for, or come to you, directly, if I'm in a fix of any kind; you may be sure of that."

And then the train began to move, and he was forced to wish her good-bye.

But Edna told herself that it would be a doleful plight, indeed, which would force her to summon him to Western Lodge whilst she suspected that Claude Trafford was hanging about in the neighborhood. At all risks these two men must be kept apart, and Marvie's unfortunate secret must be screened from Ray Mathurin's knowledge.

She remained haunted by vague apprehensions of danger all the way home, so that it was a positive relief to her when Marvie met her at the hall door as she got out of the brougham that had brought her back from the station.

Marvie seemed herself—calm, collected, and, moreover, unusually gracious.

"Well, you saw papa off?" were her first words. "I hope he started in good spirits."

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"Not particularly, I'm afraid. The poor fellow feels leaving us all dreadfully."

"Leaving *you*, you mean," replied Marvie, with a little laugh. "I really can't flatter myself that my father cares very deeply about leaving *me*."

"I think you undervalue your father's affection, Marvie. I am sure he is very fond of you."

Marvie did not reply; and the nurse and Jack appearing at that moment on the scene, the discussion was necessarily dropped.

That evening Marvie made no attempt to go out alone. Her mood was somewhat silent, and it almost seemed as though she clung to her step-mother. The two young women wandered out into the garden together after their evening meal, and suddenly, whilst they were walking across the shadowy lawn towards the rose garden, Marvie wound her arm through young Mrs. Mathurin's.

"Edna," she said, softly, calling her for the very first time by her Christian name, "I am afraid I have behaved very badly to you."

Edna was so touched that the tears rose in her eyes.

"My darling girl! my dear Marvie!" she said, brokenly but could say no more for that lump in her throat.

"I am a hateful girl, I know," Marvie went on. "I have so often made things horrid for you, but it was not, perhaps, altogether my fault."

"No—no, I know, I have always understood."

"I think," Marvie went on, "that if you would only say just once, 'Marvie, I forgive you,' that I should feel better and happier, for you have been wonderfully good to me, little stepmother."

Ah, how true and sweet, underneath all her faults and failings, was the girl's real nature.

Edna turned impulsively and drew the beautiful face down to hers, and threw her arms about her neck.

"Forgive you, Marvie! why, of course, of course! and it was natural enough. I was a stranger, an interloper, and it would have been odd if you had not resented your father's second marriage. I have always felt that."

"But I ought to have remembered that you were his wife, and have honored you, but it seems to me now, as I look back upon it all, that I have never given you anything but insult and unkindness."

"Do not think of it any more, it is all forgiven and forgotten now. And, oh, Marvie! if you only knew how happy you have made me now. I have so longed for your friendship and affection; it has been such a bitter blot upon my life not to have been friends with you; but now all that is past is swept away by your dear words, and for the future——"

"Ah!" interrupted the girl, suddenly, throwing back her head so that the starlight lit up her beautiful sad eyes. "Ah! the future! the future! who can tell what the future may bring?" Then

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with a bright change of manner she resumed, "but the present is always our own, and for to-night we are friends—nay, more—we are sisters, Edna, are we not? and I want you to know that it is all yourself, and your goodness, that have changed me so much towards you. Ray wanted me to make a friend of you from the first, and he was right."

"Ray is nearly always right," murmured Edna, pressing her hand, and anxious to score a point for the absent lover.

"Yes, that is what makes him so abominably aggravating," said Marvie, quickly, and Edna laughed a little to herself at the characteristic retort.

"We won't talk about Ray, please," the girl went on, "it is nearly bedtime, and there is no time to begin a new volume. *You* are my theme to-night, Edna, and I want you always to remember that I told you I was in the wrong, and was sorry for the past."

"I am not likely to forget it, I think."

For a few moments they paced the starlit garden together in silence, their arms locked together, and, unknown to each other, both their hearts were beating with the secret tumult.

Edna was saying to herself—

"Now is my golden chance—my opportunity. Her heart, from some cause I cannot fathom, has suddenly softened to me. Now, if ever, she might listen and believe me. How am I to begin? what shall I say first? how open the subject?"

And the greatness and danger of her task caused her to tremble, so that Marvie exclaimed—

“Why, you are shivering, you must be cold. No wonder, in this thin gauze dress and no shawl; come, let us go in, I must take care of you, now that papa is away.”

“No. Don’t go in yet, Marvie. I am not cold—let us stop out a little longer—one more turn. Indeed, I am not cold.” But Marvie began playfully to draw her towards the lighted drawing-room windows.

“And—and—I have something very, very important to say to you—something, Marvie, about my own past life.”

“Oh, is that all; then let us put it off till to-morrow, Edna. Your past is quite certain to have been as good and as blameless as your present is. I can take all that for granted, but you shall tell me to-morrow, dear little stepmother—to-morrow.”

“No, Marvie, I want you to listen now, there is something I have wanted so much to tell you. I don’t want to put it off, for if it concerns me, it concerns you also—indirectly that is.”

And there was a pause. They stood still facing each other upon the moonlit lawn, and the woman with the stronger will for the moment nearly won the day. As she grasped the girl’s hands, her firm true spirit seemed to hold her in that grasp with a relentless force. Marvie was silenced.

“You shall listen, Marvie,” said young Mrs.

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Mathurin, and the impetuous energy of her step-daughter was borne down and overpowered before the words. Marvie feared to listen, and yet, for that moment, she saw that she would have to do so.

Then occurred one of those wretched little misfortunes which sometimes are sufficient to wreck a human life—a miserable, irresponsible trifle, a causeless interruption, a maddening *contretemps*.

A white-apron and capped figure glided through the dusk, out from the corner of the house, and approached them quickly across the grass, and the voice of the nurse broke in between that tussle of two wills over a great crisis of life.

“Oh, ma’am, I do wish you would come in to Master Jack, he is so naughty, jumping about in his cot, I can’t get him to lie down at all, he is that excited, and I told him I’d go and fetch his mamma to him, and, please, ma’am, if you will come and sit by him a little while and keep him quiet, I think he’d go off to sleep, perhaps.”

“Go to your child, Edna.”

Their hands had loosened their hold of one another.

“All right, nurse, I will come,” said Mrs. Mathurin, but her voice sounded suffocated in her own ears. She knew that this interruption had lost her her chance.

The two ladies, with the nurse beside them, walked back across the garden to the house, the woman talking volubly about ‘Master Jack’s’ iniquities by the way.

"Good-night, Edna," said Marvie on the steps of the terrace, "you shall tell me to-morrow. Will you kiss me, now?" And as Edna put up her face to hers, she whispered, "And just say, 'God bless you and keep you, Marvie.'"

And Edna answered her back fervently and earnestly: "God bless you and keep you from all evil, dearest Marvie."

And so they parted.

Later on, awake upon her bed in the darkness, Edna wondered and wondered what had been at the bottom of it all? Why had Marvie melted so entirely and so suddenly? What fresh influence had been at work in the girl's emotional mind? And it was only when the gray summer dawn was just beginning to steal over the silent world, that, finding no answer to these perplexing self-questionings, and quite wearied out with ineffectual conjectures, young Mrs. Mathurin fell at last into a deep and dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER XIX.

FLIGHT.

EDNA MATHURIN's waking thoughts were with her husband. The great American liner had been due to leave Liverpool late on the previous afternoon, so that by now she must be well on the high seas. Edna went to her window and threw back the curtains. The summer morning was clear and calm, with just a light easterly breeze swaying the tops of the trees, that would but serve to waft him on his way.

There was every prospect, with fair skies and a steady glass, that he would have a good passage across the 'herring pond.' Then she thought next—as a good woman should do—of their child. Jacky had certainly been unusually restless and excited the night before. Edna, before she began to dress, stole on light bare feet across the landing to make her morning inquiry for her boy.

The nurse was up and smiling, but Jacky still lay fast asleep in his cot. His rosy cheeks were flushed with slumber, and his dark curls lay spread in lovely disorder over his pillow.

"I thought I wouldn't wake him, ma'am," whispered the nurse, "as he was so late getting off last night."

Edna nodded approval and slipped away. The woman's words reminded her of the lost opportunity of last night. She felt annoyed, but not unduly so, for in the morning sunshine everything looks easier and simpler than it does at night—difficulties disappear, and complications smooth themselves out as though by miracle.

"Of course," she said to herself, whilst she was dressing, "it makes no real difference; I shall tell her everything this morning, as soon as ever I am free after breakfast. Marvie is my friend now, I need not mind speaking openly to her."

Nevertheless, although she said the words aloud, bravely and cheerfully, deep down in her mind there lay a residuum of uneasy worry. "I wish, all the same, that I had told her last night," were the unspoken words in the background of her thoughts.

Marvie was always a very unpunctual young lady; it was therefore no surprise to Mrs. Mathurin that she finished her breakfast in solitude. When she had read her letters, which included a passionate farewell, posted at Liverpool, from her husband, and had skimmed through the newspaper, Edna rang the bell, desired that the fish and eggs might be kept hot, and more tea and toast made the moment that Miss Mathurin came down, and went light-heartedly to the kitchen, where she gave her not very extensive orders, and chatted pleasantly for a few minutes to her cook. Afterwards, having glanced in passing into the still empty dining-room, she went

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out into the garden, where the dogs ran out and fawned upon her, and the white fantail pigeons came whirling in a windy cloud about her head.

She looked up, too, at Marvie's windows, but the blinds were still closely drawn.

"Lazy girl!" she thought, with a smile, and the smile rippled up into her curious gray eyes and made them beautiful. For Edna Mathurin was happy to-day, happier by far than anything in her married life had ever made her before.

She had won the dear desire of her heart, and nothing now seemed lacking to her; and how thankful, too, she most wickedly was that Arthur should happen to be away just now, so that she could devote her whole time and energies to the cementing of this new-born affection between herself and his hitherto irreconcilable daughter.

"There will be nobody to interfere or to come between us," she said to herself, gleefully, "and alone, and unaided, I will save her for Ray, who is worthy of her."

"If you please, ma'am, do you think Miss Mathurin can have gone out riding on her bicycle?" said the voice of Perkins, Marvie's own maid, on the path behind her.

Edna whisked round. "Why?" she asked, sharply, and all her golden fancies seemed to fall suddenly into gray ashes about her.

"Because her door is locked, ma'am, and I've knocked three times, with her tea and hot water, and can't get any answer, and William has just told me that Miss Mathurin's bicycle is not in

the coach-house, so I think she must have dressed early and gone out riding."

Edna pulled herself together with a strong effort—every muscle of her face and nerve of her body was on guard instantly.

"Of course, I had forgotten; she told me she would very likely go for a ride early, before the sun was hot; it is so much cooler in the early morning."

"But why should she lock her door, ma'am?" persisted the girl, rather suspiciously.

"Oh, I dare say it has only stuck. I will go and see myself. Would you mind saying for me that Miss Mathurin will want some fresh breakfast altogether when she comes back." She invented another message and sent the woman away. She remembered, what perhaps no one else knew in the house, that the key of her own room fitted both Marvie's door and that of the night nursery. It was a little fad of her husband's to have it so; he considered it a security in case of fire or sudden illness. No one in this way, of his own family, could lock themselves in and remain un-get-at-able.

She unlocked the door of Marvie's room with her own key, and went in, closing the door carefully behind her. The room struck a chill through her heart. The bed had not been occupied. It stood in cold, undisturbed whiteness in the corner. Something in its aspect and in the drawn blinds and curtains made Edna think of a death chamber. She shivered, and hastened to fling

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back blinds and curtains, and to throw open the windows ; then she perceived certain signs of recent habitation—Marvie's black evening dress lay across a chair, her little jet embroidered slippers beneath it ; a lace-edged handkerchief had fallen upon the floor. The wardrobe door stood open, and it struck Edna that there were very few skirts hanging up inside it. On nearer inspection she found that a bicycling dress was certainly missing. She turned to the dressing-table—brushes, combs, and sundry other indispensable toilet necessities had disappeared.

These silent evidences told her everything. Edna wasted no time in horrified despair ; the truth knocked her flatly in the face, but she was not the woman to fall down under such blows.

Whatever had happened, her own part was clear. Marvie—poor, mistaken, foolish girl—must be saved from the consequences of her own folly. It was the work of but a few seconds to throw herself upon the bed, to tear back sheets and blankets into well-simulated disorder, to knock the smooth white pillow into a crumpled heap ; then to dash water into the basin ; to throw about the towels and the sponges—to transform the room, in short, from its death-like empty stillness into the likeness of a bedroom that had been used and slept in. Whatever came out later, this one night at least should be saved.

"Miss Mathurin has gone off to Lady Wishaw's for a day or two," she explained to the somewhat curious housemaids who appeared pres-

ently at the door. "I quite forgot that she told me that if it was fine she would probably get up early and ride off there in the cool of the day, before breakfast. She sent on some of her things yesterday by rail, I believe. It was stupid of me to forget about it, but I was so full of Mr. Mathurin's departure, it slipped my memory."

The servants looked at one another doubtfully, and Marvie's maid, who had joined the group, observed—

"Miss Mathurin certainly sent off a small box yesterday; she packed it herself, and it went to the station by the brougham when it went to meet you, ma'am, but I think it was directed to London, to Mme. Modèle, the dressmaker."

"Ah, yes, to be sure, where Lady Wishaw was to meet Miss Mathurin, and they were to spend a day or two in town together. I know all about it, Perkins, only I had stupidly forgotten." And Mrs. Mathurin sailed out through the little group of maidservants with her head well in the air.

They would not believe her in the least, she knew; but, at all events, it would serve to stop their tongues and put them a little off the scent for the present.

A wise general lays out his lines for a safe retreat, and Edna felt that she had done her best with the very scanty means at her disposal. "But God forgive me!" she said to herself, as she marched down-stairs, with her nose still in the air, "for I never told so many deliberate lies in the course of five minutes in my whole life before!"

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Yet surely there are some lies that reflect more credit in the telling than all the cruel truths in the universe !

What to do next ! Mr. Mathurin was out of reach even of a telegram under a week. Should she send a wire to Ray ? If she did, she knew that he would be here in a couple of hours ; but if he came, what good could he do ? To supply her with ready money was probably the only way in which he could help her, at present ; and to call for it herself at the office in the city was the simplest way to get that. For a few moments she shut herself into the library, covered her burning eyes with her hot fingers, and tried to collect her wits and her senses.

There was a horrible haunting terror at her heart—a dreadful certainty, that kept beating against her soul. In vain she tried to shut out the horror of it, crushing it down with all her might—for was there not one hope left ? and was it not her bounden duty to cling to that hope with all her strength ? If Marvie had gone to Fairfield Hall, she was safe. And what more likely and natural ? Was not Lady Wishaw her oldest friend, and probably in her confidence ? Was it not at Fairfield that she had first met Trafford. Did he not constantly stay there, and was he not, in all probability, a guest there now ?

The thought calmed her wonderfully, and in calmness lay young Mrs. Mathurin's chiefest strength.

She rang the bell, and sent an order to the stable.

Very soon afterwards she was cantering along the road towards Turnwell Hill station. It was five miles off, and was the first of the two stations that lay between Western Lodge and Fairfield. She chose to go there rather than to their own station, where she could have been driven in a few minutes, because she did not wish to attract any attention to her goings and doings. There was a little railway inn close to the station at Turnwell Hill. She put up her cob, and took the first train on.

Lady Wishaw had only just finished her breakfast, and was lounging on the sofa in her morning-room, robed in a most elaborate garment of lace and muslin and pink ribbons, which her maid called a 'matinée.' She was reading a French novel, decorously covered in brown paper, so that its somewhat notorious title should not meet the eye of the casual caller; but apparently it did not amuse her very much, for she yawned frequently and widely, and once she laid her book face downwards upon the pink ribbons on her lap, and took a letter out of her pocket, over which she frowned a good deal, and looked very savage.

"He is perfectly hateful!" she said to herself aloud, as she put it back angrily into her pocket. "I really believe it's that wretched girl who has bewitched him! Treacherous little viper! after all my kindness to her! it just shows what girls are. She *knew* he was my man; how dare she take him from me! I am glad I told her a bit of his personal history; that will have given her

something to think about—and he won't exactly bless me for it, if he hears of it but revenge is next best to love. Heigho! how dull it is without him though, and what a beast he is to say he is not coming again this side of Christmas. I do miss him. I must find another pal aomehow, I suppose; but I shan't find half such a nice one as Claude in a hurry. "Hallo!" turning her idle eyes suddenly out of the window, "who on earth can this be coming up the drive—a visitor, at this hour of the day." She jumped up and rang the bell sharply.

"Say 'out,' whoever it is," she ordered, and then she looked out again from behind the muslin frills of the curtains.

She saw a little lady in a gray riding-habit and a sailor hat walk quickly up to the front door and ring the bell.

Now Sophy Wishaw had paid a formal call upon young Mrs. Mathurin on her first arrival at Western Lodge, but she had only seen her that once, and it was eighteen months since that event; and Edna, having produced no sort of effect upon her, she did not remember her in the least. She had classified her at the time as "an insignificant little creature, with no looks at all," ergo, she could be no sort of rival to herself, and she consigned her at once into the limbo of "negligeable quantities," that counted for nothing in the scheme of creation.

She watched to see the lady in the riding-habit walk away, and wondered the while why she was

dressed in a habit if she was not riding a horse. Had her animal bolted or thrown her off!

Presently the footman, who had gone to the door, came in with a card on a silver tray.

"The lady says she must see you, my lady, as it's on a matter of importance." Sophy took up the card and read, 'Mrs Mathurin' upon it, and she flushed slightly.

"Oh, certainly, show her in."

She scented new developments, and curiosity was a burning instinct with Lady Wishaw.

Edna came into the room with a little swift glance all round it, that was not lost upon her hostess.

"Is Marvie here?" she asked, with her usual direct simplicity; but somehow she knew as she asked the question that it was answered already.

Lady Wishaw opened her eyes. "Marvie?" she exclaimed. "Why on earth should she be here? I haven't seen her for ages—not since she rode over to lunch one day! Why?—has anything happened?—have you lost her?" and the wildest surmises flashed all together through Sophy's wide-awake and up-to-date little brain. "I am really sure, Mrs. Mathurin, that something *dreadful* must have happened to bring you over here so early."

Edna laughed placidly. "I certainly feel that I owe you an apology for such an early visit, Lady Wishaw; but oh—dear, no! nothing dreadful has happened at all—what *could* happen?"

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only I was away all yesterday seeing my poor husband off to America on business, and I find - Marvie has suddenly gone away."

"In your absence, I suppose?"

"Leaving no address, silly girl," went on Edna, quickly, ignoring the interpolated question, "and I made sure she must be here—either here or with her great-aunt, Mrs. George Mathurin, in the Regent's Park; but as she is not here, that, no doubt, is where she is, and I dare say I shall hear from her by the second post. She has certainly gone to her Aunt George."

"She is *awfully* fond of her, I believe," remarked Lady Wishaw, drily.

"Well," replied Edna, with a smile, "it would have been pleasanter for her, no doubt, to have come here, and that was what made me fancy she must be with you, but you say you have—no visitors?"

For the life of her she could not help putting that last question. She wanted so much—so dreadfully much—to know!

And Sophy Wishaw grinned evilly. She knew all about it now. Her next remark would have been considered enigmatic by the uninitiated.

"I have absolutely *no* visitors, Mrs. Mathurin, none at all—either male or female. Bill and I are reveling in a Darby and Joan paradise! Have you learnt all you want to know? or shall I give you an address where I fancy that in all probability you will get the very latest news of the lost Marvie? Here it is, if you would like to

have it," and she drew that same letter again out of her pocket.

Mrs. Mathurin jumped up from her chair. "Thank you, no. I want no address, for I know where Marvie is. Since she is not with you—her greatest friend—she is, of course, with her Aunt George. There is nowhere else on the face of the earth where she could be."

"You think not?" and Lady Wishaw's eyes narrowed in that feline way with her when her mood became dangerous.

"Well, if I were you, I would go to the old aunt's in the Regent's Park, and look for her; but don't be too much disappointed if you do not find her there, Mrs. Mathurin! If you like to write to me for this address, you can always have it, you know," and she flourished the letter in her hand so that Edna could see the handwriting on the envelope.

Anger raged at her heart, but she knew better than to show it. She moved away to the door.

"I am sure I shall not need to trouble you, Lady Wishaw," she replied, with a certain quiet dignity. "I thank you, all the same, for your kindness, and also," looking back very straight into Lady Wishaw's face, "for your affectionate interest in Marvie's movements."

Then, without offering to shake hands, she opened the door and left the room.

Sophy Wishaw stamped her foot and uttered a short bad word very distinctly, for young Mrs. Mathurin had retired with all the honors of war,

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and her ladyship knew that she had been worsted in the fray.

Nevertheless, there are some victories that are purchased all too dearly, and whilst her adversary was stamping and swearing from sheer fury at her defeat, Edna Mathurin, walking quickly away down the avenue, felt almost heart-broken, for she knew now that her worst fears were realized.

CHAPTER XX.

A PRISONER.

UPON the deep stone recess of a narrow mulioned window sat a very miserable young woman.

She had sat there from morning till late afternoon almost without moving. Her sad eyes wandered out over the wide desolate valley, or else stared down at the tumbling river below the windows, as it creamed itself into unalterable curves of foam between the great brown boulders that broke its course ; then she lifted them again, mechanically, towards the semicircle of low bare hills, far away, that bounded the distant horizon.

With the exception of a fringe of mountain ash and graceful birch, which followed the margin of the river, there were but few trees in that barren landscape. There were neither fields, nor hedges, nor villages ; only the marsh and the moor, dotted at intervals with flocks of black-faced sheep, and herds of fierce-horned, rough-coated cattle, whilst the lowering gray sky, that framed in the whole scene, seemed to put the finishing touch of dreariness to this melancholy-looking country.

The girl with the passionate eyes and the hag-

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gard, tear-stained face sat looking out gloomily at it all. And to-day was the second day of it! Was it never to end? Was she never to see anything else but this weariful prospect? never to be free and happy again? never experience any other sentiments save that mingling of anger and shame and remorse, and, worst of all, of craven abject fear.

And it was her own doing; there lay the sting of it all, the self-torment that was the bitterest portion of her punishment. She had listened to the voice of the tempter and had yielded to him, and he had tricked and betrayed her.

Well she supposed she deserved it all. The delusion was over now and she was awake, but that did not make it any the less hopeless and horrible, and, good God! what was to be the end of it all?

The room in which she sat was furnished simply but comfortably. A heavy oak table occupied the center of the by no means large apartment, and some beautifully-carved oak chairs stood about it. A chintz-covered couch occupied the corner by the fireplace, and a book-case, filled with old-fashioned books of a century ago, was against the wall. A well-worn Turkey carpet covered the floor. Through an open door a smaller room containing a bed could be seen, and of this, too, the furniture, if somewhat plain, was solid and sufficient, and by no means uncomfortable. The windows of both rooms faced the same way. They were barred across

with iron, as in a prison, and they stood high up in the gray stone tower, overlooking the valley and the river and the low line of brown hills, beyond which lay England and freedom ; for this building, in which Marvie Mathurin found herself a prisoner, was one of those old Border Towers, of which a goodly number are still in existence along the North Country boundary, standing stern and unbending still, after the lapse of centuries, with their immensely thick walls of gray stone, which the hand of time seems scarcely to have touched with its defacing fingers. Even the ivy and the small clinging ferns of the country had not, in this instance, been able to throw a softening veil over the bleak mass of masonry—the monumental survival of the fierce, warlike times of early English history.

Trafford Tower had never, like many of its fellows, been restored or altered or improved upon. No modern building had sprung up by the side of the great round keep with its castellated summit; no flowery gardens or shaded shrubberies had been laid out at its feet. It rose, as it had done at the beginning, straight out of the rocky soil on which it had been built, and the shelving bank, which sloped down from its heavy buttresses towards the rushing river, was unadorned save by the heather and the brambles, and the clumps of yellow stone-crop with which the hand of nature had clothed it. Amongst the depths of its foundations still yawned the black dungeons of the Middle Ages, the iron

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gratings, the heavy clamped doors, the damp green-stained walls, from which still hung fragments of rusty chains, which had once secured the victims of that iron age ; and in the center of these dark vaults there still gaped a round slime-side hole, the bottomless well, down which many a shivering wretch had been cast, whose last agonizing cries were soon silenced forever in the gurgle of rushing waters far below.

Above this gruesome and now never-visited foundation the tower rose into three stories of habitual and even cheerful rooms, connected one with the other by a spiral stone staircase, and each floor was well and comfortably furnished, for Trafford Tower had never remained entirely uninhabited. Its owners had always lived here for some portion of the year. They had, at divers times, acquired other lands and other homes, but the stern cradle of their race had never ceased to wrest a certain allegiance and affection from its successive owners. They had put it now and then to ignoble uses, but they had returned to it themselves again and again, under the spell of an irresistible attraction.

But its stern beauties had no charm for the unhappy girl who was now practically a prisoner within its ancient walls. She had been tricked and fooled into a false position, and her proud spirit was crushed and broken ; and with it, too, her heart had suffered. Love, which is but a delicate plant, had been rudely stricken, but enough of the half-wrenched-out roots of it re-

mained to cause her grievous pain, whilst that element of fear, which had always lain at the bottom of everything, had grown stronger and more assertive than ever.

It was fear that made her flush and tremble, and then turn cold and pale, as the heavy bolts were suddenly drawn back from the door and the key turned noisily in the lock outside. It was her jailer, who was coming to pay her his daily visit.

Anything less like a villain of melodrama it would be difficult to imagine than the sleek, well-groomed man who entered the room. Trafford was in evening dress, a garb in which his really magnificent figure showed to its best advantage. He smiled as he came forward with extended hand; his pale, deep-set eyes shone with a pleasant gleam, in which there was both tenderness and solicitude for his captive, and when he spoke to her, the delightful tones of his softly-modulated voice awoke a thousand happy memories in her heart, which she strove in vain to smother.

"Good evening, my dear Marvie," he said, gently. "I have been away all day on business, or I should have been up to see you before."

For a perceptible moment his hand remained outstretched and empty; Marvie's lay locked together on her knee, and her eyes were cast down.

"Won't you shake hands with me," he murmured, in the softest voice; "is it still so bad as all that?"

The magnetism that was in the man's person-

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ality forced her to lift her eyes, and then she put out a cold and trembling hand. He held it closely for a moment between both his own.

"Why, you are quite cold, child! and it is getting dark, and you have no lamp. These people of mine don't half look after you, and our Junes up in the North Country are never too balmy."

He rang the bell, and a grim-faced old housekeeper answered the summons.

"Set light to the fire, Mrs. Tamthwaite," he said, briefly, "and bring a lamp at once; and we shall dine up here to-night, if you don't object, that is," he added, turning to Marvie. "I should like to have my dinner here with you to-night—that is, if I may. May I?"

"I haven't much choice in the matter, I imagine," she answered, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Every choice. Your word is law to me. May I dine with you?"

Mrs. Tamthwaite was lighting the lamp on the oak table; in her presence Marvie could scarcely refuse; she bent her head.

"Certainly, if you wish it," she murmured.

"Thanks, that is all right; dinner here, Mrs. Tamthwaite, in half-an-hour's time."

The housekeeper left the room with an odd smile on her thin lips. She had lived forty years in Trafford Tower, and she had seen some queer doings in it in her time, but this episode struck her as being one of the strangest of all; and it

must be mentioned that for ten years she had filled the position half of maid, half of keeper, to Claude Trafford's mad wife.

"I wonder what he be up to now," she muttered to herself, as she stumped away down the worn stone steps to her ground-floor kitchen. "Marriage, perhaps?—umph!—not likely. Yet she be a fine lassie."

Trafford and Marvie were left alone. She refused to leave her place and sit nearer the newly-lit fire, so he leant up against the deep embrasure of the window recess opposite to her and looked down at her. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and made no attempt to touch her. She said nothing, but she was acutely conscious of the influence which he exercised over her. Although she looked studiously away from him, she knew that his eyes could read her face like an open book, and she feared him horribly. Worse than that, she feared herself.

"Well," he said at last, "is it still to be war between us? Are you not going to forgive me soon?"

"I will forgive you when you let me go; when you give me back my liberty." She did not look at him as she said this. It was a struggle to keep her eyes from his, because his will was stronger than hers, and she well knew that he was exerting it to the uttermost to force her to look at him. When her eyes met his he became irresistible to her. She had told him this once, in the days when she had been happy in his love, and she knew that he remembered it now.

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"Still obdurate?" he murmured, half playfully.

"Prisoners usually are," she replied, studying the links in her cuffs.

"You are not a prisoner, you are a guest."

She tossed up her chin with a little snort of derision.

"You don't believe what I say, because your door is locked; but you know very well that you have only to say one little word, one whispered 'yes,' to what I have asked of you, and the bolts and bars will fly open and you will be as free as air. What prisoner can purchase liberty so easily?"

"At what a price!" she retorted, bitterly.

For a moment he was silent. He bent a little forward and scanned her downcast face with earnest attention. Her resistance to his will gave him just that stimulus which he enjoyed so keenly, because he so seldom met it. To a man whose conquests had always been speedy and cloyingly facile, the element of opposition was a veritable enchantment. He had regretted one woman only, for a long while, in his past life, and that solely, because she had defeated him by withdrawing herself from him. Two days ago he had half-sickened of Marvie because she had seemed to yield to his wishes so easily; but now his passion was fanned once more into flame by the fresh resistance which she offered to him.

He was going to have trouble with her after all, he said to himself, and, as the smell of battle

is to an old soldier, so trouble in getting his way with a woman braced Tafford's energies and increased his desires for her to an inconceivable degree.

"You know," he said, leaning towards her and lowering his voice into that mellow tenderness of tone which he had always found to be so effective ; "you know that you don't really mean what you say," and he bent so close to her that his breath, as he spoke, stirred the little disordered curls upon her forehead, so that she shivered and shrank away from him.

The movement did not offend him—he understood this instinctive terror perfectly. He drew himself up and spoke again.

"Are you quite sure you really want to be free?" he asked. But he did not wait for an answer. He drew one of the high-backed oak chairs forward and sat down opposite to her. "Listen to me ; I am going to recapitulate what I said to you before."

She waved her hand impatiently. "For what purpose ? I understood you perfectly."

"Yes, you may have understood, but I doubt if you quite believe me even now. That night, when you met me in the garden of your father's house, and I endured, for a good half-hour, your angry reproaches, I did really speak the truth when I told you what you did not seem to believe—that my wife is dead."

"I did believe it ! How dare you say I did not ? Do you suppose that I should have come

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away with you if I had believed you to be a married man?—but you told me then that she had been dead a week. You tell me now that she died two years ago.”

“Well, you know that a man must sometimes dissemble a little if he wants to win the woman he loves—eh, Marvie?”

“Ah, spare me that, pray!” she cried, with agitation, “you do not love me.”

“Ah, but I do, very much. In my own way, I admit, which, perhaps, is not quite the ordinary way—it is certainly not the commonplace conventional three-volume novel way; it is rather perhaps——”

“The way in which you loved Sophy Wishaw.”

He smiled, not ill-pleased—jealousy brought her nearer to him.

“We will discuss that presently,” he said, “for the moment, let us talk about ourselves. You admit, then, that I practically told you the truth that night. I am going to be perfectly candid with you now, and tell you everything. Lady Wishaw, kindly and considerately, told you something of my history, but not everything, because she does not know everything. My wife is really and truly dead. She died two years ago, so that I have always been, in one sense, free to marry ever since I have known you. She was out of her mind for ten years, and she is buried out yonder,” with a wave of the hand towards the fast-darkening landscape. “Some day, when you come out for a walk with me, we will go together

to the churchyard and look at her grave, and if you care to do so, you shall see the entry of her burial in the Parish Register. Will that satisfy you,—do you believe me now ? ”

“ Yes, I suppose so, but then in that case—why—why—— ? ”

“ Why did I not marry you out of hand ? Is that what you wanted to ask ? ”

“ I imagined that that was your intention,” she answered, almost sullenly.

“ Why so ?—did I say anything about marriage ? Did I not, on the contrary, ask you to trust me entirely, to leave every arrangement to me, to consent to come straight up here with me, where everything could be much better arranged between us than in London ? I asked you to trust me.”

“ And you had asked me to be your wife, and so I did trust you.”

“ And can you honestly say that I have abused your trust ? No, no, my dear Marvie, I have treated you all through as a man treats not an irrational child, but as a sensible and reasonable being, as a woman he looks upon as his dearest friend and loves and honors accordingly. Nor can I honestly accuse myself of having misled you. I told you from the first that my life had been a strange and unusual one, and that my love affairs could not be as those of ordinary men. My career has been stormy—my marriage was disastrous. You might, at least, pity me for that. For many years I was tied to a woman who went out of her mind a fortnight after she married me,

and yet my lips were sealed, and out of regard to her family I was unable to speak of her condition. As time went on, nine people out of ten believed me to be unmarried. I almost came to believe it myself. If I have sinned, surely I have had some excuse for my sins. My fate was an exceptionally hard one; are you not sufficiently broad-minded to admit that, Marvie?"

"Yes, yes, of course I am. I am most deeply sorry for what you have had to suffer in the past, but now—now—since you are free—since your wife is dead, why are you asking of me an impossible sacrifice?"

"Because I myself have sacrificed half my life to attain a certain object, and because, having at last obtained that object, I do not mean to relinquish it."

"You mean—" and her eyes opened themselves widely with an intense condemnation in them, and she withdrew herself back instinctively from him with a physical shrinking from what is detestable. "You mean—*the money*?"

"Exactly," he replied, unconcernedly. "My wife's fortune was a large one; it is settled on me for my life. If I marry again I lose every penny of it."

Sophy Wishaw had been right then. His wife's death made no difference to him. Marvie drew a long shuddering breath, and twisted her hands one into the other.

"I want you to understand exactly," he went on,

"I do. You married that poor woman for her money."

"I did. Personally she was repulsive to me, but she was rich. She and her sister were co-heiresses. My father had arranged the match, and I consented to it, willingly enough, I admit—why not! We were very poor; my prospects were starvation or the Colonies—few men in my position would have refused the alternative of five thousand a year."

"And you knew, at the time, that she was mad?"

"No—God knows I did not. Her father and mother took good care that I should never hear a whisper of that! And yet they knew it perfectly themselves, for it came out afterwards that the poor thing had spent six months in a private asylum a few years before her marriage to me. They may have hoped that there would be no recurrence of her malady—I cannot say; but as there had been madness already in her mother's family, the chances were certainly in favor of a return of her mental disease. Anyhow, they kept it dark enough from me."

"That was a cruel shame."

"A cruel shame, indeed! I wanted her money badly, but had I known the truth about her, I think I should have let the money go; but I did not know, and we were married. When the catastrophe came I was not allowed, by her father, to have her sent away to a proper place of confinement. There was her sister to marry, he said; any publicity would infallibly ruin her chances.

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The secret of my wife's condition must be kept at all hazards, and it was arranged, against my wishes and much against my judgment, that she should be shut up here."

"Here?—in these very rooms, do you mean?" cried Marvie, in horror.

Trafford threw a look about him. "Well, now you come to mention it—yes, I believe it *was* here; the rooms above are so much like these, for a moment I had forgotten; but why need you mind? all that is over and forgotten. It is two years since she died."

Marvie's eyes wandered with a slow horror round the encircling walls.

"And she died—*here*?"

"Here, or in the next room, I really don't know; I was not here. Mrs. Tamthwaite will know all about it—you can ask her if you have any curiosity on the subject."

"God forbid!" ejaculated Marvie, with a shudder, and her prison became at once fifty times more odious than it had been before.

"I am to understand, then," she said, after a slight pause, "that this money of your dead wife's is of more value to you than I am—that you will give me up sooner than lose it?"

"Nothing of the kind," he answered, with energy. "I have no intention of giving up either. My dear girl, I take you to be a sensible woman; you know the importance of money quite as well as I do—as well as the impossibility of living upon nothing."

"My father is well off, he would give me something," she murmured.

"‘Something’; yes, I dare say, but what? Not, perhaps, as much as a thousand a year, and I am, at present, living upon an income of five times that amount. Do be reasonable, Marvie—I am a man of expensive habits. I could not possibly begin at my age to practise small economies, and you—you also, have been accustomed to everything of the best. You are a beautiful woman—handsome dresses from the best London and Paris dressmakers are essential to you, old lace and diamonds are very becoming to you, and then, of course, you must have a brougham and a victoria, a yacht, as well, if you fancy it. Why not? All these I shall be able to afford with ease, and be only too delighted to give you."

"It is infamous," she cried, suddenly springing to her feet and beginning to pace the small room backwards and forwards after her old impetuous way. "You are trying to buy me! What would my position be in the eyes of the world were I to consent to such a proposal? Should I have a single friend on earth who would not turn from me with horror?"

"But we need not remain in England. I love my London, certainly, but for your sake I would consent to live elsewhere—in any foreign capital you please, or else in America. You would bear my name, and no one would ask questions about you abroad; you would be supposed to be my wife, and with your beauty and my money, do

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you suppose anyone is in the least likely to turn a cold shoulder to us? And besides, you love me, Marvie."

Did she love him? Marvie was not sure. Only a week ago—only three days ago, in fact—she had told herself that she would gladly die for love of him. Her love had been of so overwhelming a nature, indeed, that she had flung herself with impulsive recklessness into his arms, trusting this man, of whom she knew so little, so absolutely, that she had not hesitated to leave her father's house at his request. With one word he had demolished Lady Wishaw's story—his wife? Yes, there had been a wife, but she was dead, and in her joy and relief she had instantly discredited all the rest of Sophy's story, taking it for granted that Trafford would certainly marry her as soon as it was practicable.

This delusion had scarcely been able to survive the unlooked-for incident of the journey to Northumberland upon which he had insisted, nor her incarceration in the Border Tower. She had doubted him once more, and half disbelieved his story, and, as her doubts increased, her love had waned.

Yet in the glamour of his presence the old undefinable fascination had revived anew, and she could not hate and despise him so sincerely as she wished to do.

And it was here that her fear of him came in. What he proposed to her was repugnant and horrible to her, and yet she dreaded that she would

be compelled against her better self to agree to his proposals. It was almost as though he hypnotized her ; perhaps, indeed, that may have been the veritable interpretation of his extraordinary power over her. And Claude Trafford's influence over women had always been remarkable.

"And if I refuse?" she said, at length, "what will you do then?"

"Oh, but you will not refuse, my dearest," he replied, tenderly, passing his arm gently round her and endeavoring to draw her nearer to him ; "you will not refuse, so that we need not discuss alternatives." And Marvie scarcely knew whether to be glad or sorry that Mrs. Tamthwaite appeared at this moment at the door with a tray in her arms, so that Trafford was compelled to relinquish his meditated caress. He behaved very well for the rest of the evening, avoided all contentious subjects during dinner, and left her almost immediately after the meal was over, raising her hand respectfully to his lips as he wished her good-night.

Whatever his position might be as her jailer, Trafford was far too wise to presume upon it. He was too clever, and also too well versed in the fastidious ways of women, to treat her with anything but the most marked respect.

You can coax a woman into anything you like was one of his theories. You can force her into nothing, but fear and dislike. And he never came near her the next day. In this also he showed his wisdom.

CHAPTER XXI.

TO THE RESCUE.

THERE was, however, one person whom, clever as he was, Claude Trafford had been foolish enough to leave altogether out of the reckoning.

And that person was young Mrs. Mathurin. Trafford had never probably considered Edna in the light of a serious obstacle to his plans with regard to Marvie.

He had heard from Lady Wishaw long ago, and subsequent conversations with the girl herself had only confirmed the fact, that Marvie and her stepmother were on very bad terms with one another ; that the stepmother should turn out to be no other than his little lover of former days—Edna Coulston—appeared to him to tend only to the widening of the breach between them. Edna's natural antipathy to her husband's grown-up daughter would surely not be diminished by the fact of that daughter having presumed to supplant herself in the regard of her old lover. That Marvie should elope from her father's house in his absence, under circumstances which most probably would forbid her ever being received again in that house, must surely, argued Trafford, be a subject of very sincere congratulation to the

stepmother, with whom she had agreed so badly. It was most unlikely that young Mrs. Mathurin would put up a finger to stop Marvie from rushing upon her doom. Female jealousy alone would prevent her from doing so.

Trafford, however, had studied but one type of woman, and Edna had always been, and was still, an unread riddle to him. It was true that in that most unexpected and unpleasant meeting at Cleave Manor she had seemed to urge him into an honest and straightforward course with regard to her stepdaughter; but that he considered to be part of the game, and a necessary attitude for the new rôle of respectable matron, which her social elevation had compelled her to assume, whilst the promise she had exacted from him neither to write to nor to see Marvie was probably not intended to be taken seriously, and was, in any case, not to be considered for a moment in the face of his own desires and intentions. A promise to such a man as Claude Trafford means absolutely nothing. He might, perhaps, have kept it a little longer, had not opportunity—the opportunity of Arthur Mathurin's absence from England—played so temptingly into his hands.

To some natures there is no resisting the strong claims of an alluring opportunity. In taking advantage of it, it did not seem to him that young Mrs. Mathurin would have either the will or the power to fight him.

If she had really meant mischief, she would

have told her husband at once ; that she had not done so appeared to him not unnaturally to be a strong argument in favor of her remaining quiescent. She was in no way responsible for Marvie's actions, and her husband could not possibly blame her for them.

Safe herself, what more natural than that she should be glad to get rid of the girl ? ”

Perhaps, however, Trafford might have been less confident on this point had he been a listener to that last conversation between the two women on the evening of Marvie's flight from her home.

That Marvie should have been the one to have held out the hand of friendship to her despised stepmother would not have surprised him nearly as much as that Edna should have met her advances half-way with joy and eagerness. A woman who had nothing petty in her composition, and whose nature was essentially a noble one, was a specimen of her sex whom Claude Trafford neither knew nor comprehended. In his estimation, charming and delightful as they are to men, women are all odious to each other ; they are jealous of one another ; they slander and speak evil of each other, and they may be safely trusted to go on quarreling amongst themselves to the end of the chapter.

That there are some exceptions to this not unusual condition of things had not as yet thoroughly entered into his calculations. The women of his world had all been of one type—soft and delightful to pet and to caress, but vixenish and

vicious when crossed or thwarted, like the animal to whom some of them are openly likened. Edna, only, like some meteoric star, had flashed once across the horizon of his life, and though he had treated her as he had treated the rest, most unaccountably she had not behaved in the least like the others ; therefore, there had always been a residuum of discomfort and doubt at the bottom of his mind about her, and his theories were hopelessly at sea concerning her still.

For those first two days he had been a little uneasy ; but when he found she made no move, he dismissed the doubt from his mind. Of course she would do nothing ; it was to her interest to hold her tongue, and did not a woman always consider her own interests above all ?

He had thought it possible that she might follow her stepdaughter, and he had half anticipated that she might come thundering at the heavy iron knocker on the ponderous oak door of the Border Tower. Hence, possibly, the strict commands he had laid upon his absolutely immaculate housekeeper, Mrs. Tamthwaite, with regard to her prisoner.

When it appeared certain that he was to be left in unmolested possession of his captive, he breathed more freely, and made up his mind to relax the rigor of his surveillance.

"To-morrow," he said to his factotum, as he mounted his dog-cart at an early hour, "to-morrow, Miss Mathurin will be well enough to go out for a little walk if it keeps fine."

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"It ain't going to keep foine," replied the old woman, with an upward nod of her head at the gray and lowering sky, "there'n be a sta'rm afore night; be ye goin' far, Squoire?"

But the Squire never told his plans to his servants. "Far enough, far enough!" he answered, pleasantly. "I shall get back some time to-night, but I shan't see the lady to-day at all. You must take care of her."

And then he gathered up the reins and drove off at a swinging pace towards the bridge. He was, in fact, going a long way—some eighteen or twenty miles across the bleak moorland—to visit a farmer with whom he was negotiating for the purchase of a horse. This man, who was well known to him, was a breeder of horses of an excellent stamp, and he had just at the moment a four-year-old of which Trafford had heard great things—a bright bay, of fifteen hands, with white points, and warranted broken to harness. The figure was moderate, and altogether Trafford was well inclined to the purchase. He was, however, a careful buyer, and he had stipulated for a trial; and, as it was almost too long a journey for one animal to Cheviotdale Farm and back in one day, he proposed leaving his own steady brown mare there, and driving back the young horse, arranging for his own animal to be sent back as occasion served if he decided to keep the bay, or to be exchanged in the same manner should he not, after a week's trial, be satisfied with the bay's performances.

Trafford was a good judge of a horse, and enjoyed anything to do with one ; he was an excellent whip as well as a good rider, and he looked forward to the long solitary drive with pleasure. Though the sky was dark and threatening, with banks of cloud that scudded wildly across it, it did not actually rain, and the wind, if somewhat high, was nevertheless soft and pleasant. He was in good spirits ; his conversation with Marvie last night had made him believe himself to be on the high-road to success. He was always successful, he said to himself, where women were concerned, and he believed Marvie to be delightfully in love with him. Would she have trusted herself so blindly to him if she had not been ? It was now pretty well impossible for her to draw back, he argued to himself ; she had stepped over the boundary line in running away with him, and a three days' sojourn in his house was too serious a matter to admit of palliation or explanation. Marvie was sensible enough to understand the full meaning of what she had done. She had burnt her boats, and would of necessity be driven into his arms. There was no other course open to her, and he meant her to come on his own terms. Meanwhile her show of resistance added a singular piquancy to his pursuit of her.

Naturally Trafford was perfectly well aware that he was contemplating what all decent people would stigmatize a very blackguard course of action, but as he did not intend to remain in England, what did anybody's opinion matter ! More-

over, the man's moral sense was so blunted that he did not honestly consider that he was going to do anything very dreadful.

It was not vice at all, he said to himself, but that confounded money ! If it were not for that he would marry Marvie, of course ; he would, indeed, much rather have done so had it been feasible, for she was handsome and pleasant, and sufficiently well born. She would have made him a creditable wife, and a wife—in name at least—he meant her to be to him. But surely she must see, as well as he did, that to give up a large fortune for the sake of a sentiment would be rank madness ; no man could be expected to do as much for any woman. Marvie was too much a woman of the world not to see that for herself !

Well, surely she would come round to his views herself—once she got accustomed to the idea, and realized the consequences of the position into which her own folly had placed her ; why, then, of course, she would do as he wanted.

He began mapping out his future with her. They might as well stop on here till after the grouse shooting. The prospects this year were good, birds plentiful and healthy ; then there would be some partridges later on the low ground ; and, yes, really Trafford did believe that with Marvie as a companion he would manage not to be too much bored up here for two or three months. Although he knew himself to tire of things very quickly, yet he did not honestly think he should get sick of her society in that time, with

grouse and partridges to help out. Then, later, they would go off to the South. He meant to buy or hire a yacht, and make an extended voyage in the Mediterranean and Grecian seas. No doubt a man or two of his acquaintance could be found to go with them, to make things more lively. Next spring they would have to make a home in some foreign capital, or in America, if she preferred it—it should be as she liked. England, of course, was out of the question for some years at any rate ; and so his castles in the air ran on, and he whipped up the mare and breasted the soft strong wind that wailed across the brown moors with a not ill-satisfied sense of delight and exhilaration.

He would not possibly have had so light a heart could he have known that at that very moment young Mrs. Mathurin was issuing forth from the porch of a thatched cottage not half a mile away from his wild north country tower.

The woman under whose roof she had spent the night came out after her into the little garden.

“ Dear, it do one good to see you again, miss—ma’am, I should say,” she said, her honest rosy face beaming with pleasure ; “ and to think you’ve been right across the world since you was here last, and seen foreign countries and cities, and then to come back here all unexpected like—it do seem wonderful ! ”

“ Well, Sarah, one doesn’t forget old friends and old places, however far one has traveled, you know.”

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"No, miss, not some don't. And it's natural, too, as you should want to see your poor papa's grave again. You'll find it all nice and tidy; I've seen to that. I've never forgot the kind old master."

Sarah had been cook for many years at the vicarage in old days, and had known Edna from her childhood. After her master's death, and the breaking up of the modest establishment, Sarah had married the village carpenter, who had courted her persistently for ten years. Edna Coulston had vanished from her life, and had gone 'to foreign parts,' a comprehensive term that covers a wide area of the world's surface in the minds of persons of her class. She had never believed that she would see her young mistress again, and the suddenness of this unexpected visit, announced briefly on a post-card the previous day, had 'flustered' the good creature almost as much as it had delighted her. She and her guest had sat up late on the previous evening, talking over old times and new. To learn that 'Miss Edna' had been round the world, and was married and had a child of her own, was an almost miraculous revelation to Sarah, and it only struck her as right and natural that she should have come up on this flying visit to her old home for the pious purpose of visiting her father's grave.

Mrs. Mathurin, in return for her confidences, had asked for news of old friends in the village and neighborhood, and, as Sarah was garrulous, she soon extracted all she wanted to know.

Sandwiched in between volumes of extraneous information concerning the births, deaths and marriages of the village community, came at last the words which she had expected to hear.

"And you've heard, perhaps, ma'am, that there was a poor crazy wife of the Squire's up at the Tower all the time we was at the vicarage? Well, she is dead now."

"She died quite recently?" queried Edna.

"Oh, dear, no; a long time back. Two year ago come this June. How quiet 'e kept her all those years, to be sure! You never 'eard of 'er, I dessay, when you was a young girl; nor anyone else, only them Tamthwaites as minded 'er, and is a deep lot themselves, I say. Well, it all come out after you went away. Folk used to say the Tower was 'aunted—and with all the wicked things as 'ad gone on in it, it wouldn't be wonderful; and there began to be screams and shouts 'eard, and I believe it was the new parson as found out all about it—that the Squire had been keeping a mad wife shut up there for years. It was a mercy for the poor thing when she died, and for the parish too, for 'er screams o' nights was something awful at last."

"And she died, you say, nearly two years ago. Did she die of consumption?"

"Oh, dear, no; it was just a kind of fit. Mr. Trafford were away at the time, and it was sudden-like at the end. 'E have been mostly away enjoyin' 'isself up in London, I'm told. 'E didn't look after 'er much. But my Jim tells me 'e

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'ears from the postman he be come down now. None of us ever see him, 'e comes and goes, and sometimes we only hear when he is gone.

Edna was silent for a little while.

The discovery that Trafford had lied to her about his wife was no great surprise to her. Yet it had cut away her last hope. He meant evil by Marvie and not good; so much seemed to her to be certain. She was glad she had come.

She duly visited her father's grave in the morning, and read at the same time the brief record on the stone of the Trafford monument of the demise of "Clementina Trafford of Trafford Tower, after many years of suffering, patiently borne, aged thirty-five," and remembering that gruesome story of the piercing screams that had terrified the simple country people, she had turned away with a shudder.

There had been no screams to betray that secret tragedy in her time—only an unbroken silence which had played into Claude Trafford's hands.

CHAPTER XXII.

A TURN OF FATE.

THE storm burst at last. The soft wind of the morning had gathered strength hour after hour, and by late afternoon a veritable gale was driving fiercely up from the not far distant North Sea, whence it swept in an easterly direction over the wide barren hills of the land. With the wind also came swift rushing scuds of slanting rain, quick flashes now and again of forked lightning, that cast momentary glints of weird white light upon the blackness of the closing day, and deep-throated rumblings of savage thunder out of the lowering masses of clouds that rushed continuously across the wide face of the angry sky.

An ugly night, and one bad to be out in. Along the mountain road, that glittered white with rain, like a wet ribbon thrown across the brown earth, a belated traveler urged on a timid young horse up and down the many curves of the hills, whilst every flash of lightning made the quivering animal start and swerve, half stop, half turn, fling up his head, or spring forward with a bound of terror. In less practised hands the hot-blooded young animal would scarcely have come safely as far as this, but the driver knew his work, and the element of

danger only added zest to his delight in it. He set his teeth together, and his eyes shone with the joy of battle, whilst the rain dashed against his face and hung in heavy drops upon his hair and moustache.

"What a beast of a night," he muttered to himself; "but I shall get the bay home somehow—only two miles more now."

No sane person, one would have supposed, would have deliberately walked out of doors to wait in such weather; yet to-day there was someone who had done this, a woman who, of her own free will, stood braving the storm, regardless of the rain and wind. A few hundred yards beyond the bridge over the swollen river, Edna Mathurin leant against a low stone wall that skirted the road and waited for the return of the dog-cart. It could come back no other way, she knew, and she intended to meet it, and to speak alone with the man who was driving it. It was her opportunity. What was the storm—what were a hundred storms to her! She was clad in a long dark, woolen cloak, the hood being drawn down closely over her head; no umbrella could have been held up in such a wind, although there was some small shelter from its violence in the dip of the road in which she had selected to wait. The rain lashed against her unprotected face and dribbled in rivulets down the folds of her clinging garments, but young Mrs. Mathurin had been born and bred in this wild north country land. Its rough storms were familiar to her from her childhood. She did not

mind the driving rain, and she did not fear the lightning. It was not the first time he and she had met, under storm-driven skies along that north country road, and a great glow of kindling exhilaration filled her heart and warmed her blood as she remembered it.

"He and I," she murmured to herself, "he and I, once more at the old trysting-place—after all these years."

Only that long ago they had been wont to meet as lovers, whereas to-day they were to meet as opponents—almost as foes.

"He owes me this," she said to herself, as she waited, "and he shall give it to me, It is my due; for all the past that lies between us I claim it at his hands! It is the only reparation he can make me now, and I will have it! It is little enough to ask; it won't cost him much; he will get over it very soon. He never cares for any woman long—he soon tires; the last new love perishes in deadly satiety out of his shallow heart almost before the next new one dawns upon his horizon. Why did God give such a wondrous power of attraction to a man with so bad and light a nature! It is a cruel thing that it should be so—that all his charming gifts, the thrilling power of his marvelous personality, that even I can recognize now, after all I know, and all I have suffered at his hands, so that his presence is still able to shake and move me! How terrible that this great and wonderful secret of fascination should be the possession of one who never spared a woman

yet if he could get the better of her. If I thought, indeed, that he would reform and make Marvie happy—? but no, he never will! He means evil by her. The lie that he told me about his wife's death proves that. But I will save her yet—I will wrest her out of his hands."

Since the morning young Mrs. Mathurin had found out a good many things. She had learnt, to begin with, that Marvie was a captive at the Tower, for she had caught a glimpse of her sad white face at the barred upper window of her prison. And she had gone into the lower rooms to pay a friendly visit to Mrs. Tamthwaite, who was an old acquaintance, and had found her adamant, as, indeed, she had expected her to be. Not that she had been so foolish as to attempt to tamper with her loyalty to her master. No, she had only induced her to talk, and the woman—more especially of that class—who does not succumb to the temptation of talk has yet to be found. Mrs. Tamthwaite had no mind to risk her situation by any deviation from the path of her duty to her master, but she had no objection on earth to a good gossip with an old friend like Miss Coulston. Edna allowed herself to be called so uncontradicted. And in the course of that gossip, by the help of judicious openings and leading remarks, Edna managed to learn a good many things. She found out exactly the day and the hour that Trafford had brought back a mighty handsome lady with him to Trafford Tower, and locked her up in the same rooms where poor crazy madam had

lived and died. And Mrs. Tamthwaite was of opinion that he meant to marry this lady, for they seemed to be getting on first-class, and had had their dinner together last night. "Howsomever, ye never can tell with the Squoire," she added, with caution; "'e be a wild 'un, as all 'is forbears 'ave been, and where there's a woman in it—well, ye never know what a Trafford 'ull do."

Then Edna was told that he had driven away this morning, no one knew where, across the moors, but he would be back to-night, he said, for certain sure; "but a duckin' is what 'e'll get, as I told 'im before 'e started," she added, with a glance out of the window towards the gathering storm.

And then, most valuable knowledge of all, Edna discovered where the keys of the upper rooms were kept. For whilst she was sitting in the kitchen, Marvie, in want of some trifling thing, rang the bell, and before its loud clanging ceased, Mr. Tamthwaite, crying "Excuse me a moment, Miss, that's the lady's bell," snatched up the keys from a nail on the wall and fled up the spiral staircase.

When she came down again, Edna looked steadfastly out of the window and pretended not to see Mrs. Tamthwaite put back the keys in their place, and no suspicion entered into the housekeeper's mind that her visitor had taken any special notice of them.

All this had helped her to formulate some sort of a plan in her mind. As yet, however, the

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plan, which must be perfected by a dozen not-to-be-foreseen accidents and circumstances, was in a very vague and inchoate state. So much depended upon what she said to Trafford when she met him, and upon what he would say to her. And it is not to be denied that she realized fully that the risks of the interview that lay before her would try her courage to the uttermost.

When at last she caught the sound of the hoof-beats of the horse along the road, there came upon her, for one moment, an absolute suffocation of nervousness. But Edna was no coward, and knowing all that lay at stake, she resolutely braced her nerves and rallied her failing heart to carry out that which she had determined to do. She stepped out from the shadow of the stone wall into the road, just as the lamps of the cart came into sight over the rise of the short hill.

She threw up her arm. The dark cloak fell back to her shoulder, leaving exposed the sleeve of her light-colored dress beneath it.

What happened next she could never afterwards rightly describe or remember. There came a blinding flash of lightning, that seemed to strike the earth between herself and the advancing vehicle, and threw a startling flare of lurid light upon herself; then immediately afterwards the loud roar of the thunder, and as this sound rolled sullenly away into the distance, there came other noises—the plunging of a horse in terror, the smashing of his heels against the splashboard of the dog-cart, and the crackle of splintering of

wood ; then a shout and a volley of oaths ringing out through the darkness, a heavy fall, a groan—then utter silence.

As her eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness, and recovered from the pain which the vivid lightning had caused her, she became aware that the road was blocked by a confused black mass. Horse, cart, and man seemed to be thrown together into a heap. The lamp nearest to her lay under what was left of the body of the cart, and was extinguished, but the lamp on the further side, although smoking and guttering, was still alight. She groped her way round the heap of ruins and managed to detach it from its place, and carried it back with her to the near side. The horse did not move, and when the dim light fell fully upon him, she saw to her horror that the broken end of the shaft had struck deeply into his side, inflicting a fearful, and too evidently a fatal, wound. But the man had groaned—presumably he was alive.

He lay half under the cart, and she found that he was breathing heavily, but his eyes were closed. and he was apparently unconscious, for when she touched him and spoke to him he did not move or answer.

She stooped over him and tried to raise him, but she soon found that the task was beyond her strength, and that there was only one thing to be done—to leave him and fetch efficient help.

Fortunately the distance was not great ; it was

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barely half a mile from the scene of the accident to the gate of Trafford Tower.

The Tamthwaites were sitting over their supper in the kitchen. Old Joe, who was groom and gardener and butler all in one, was getting anxious. Once or twice he had been outside the door to look out, and had come in shaking his head over the storm and the rain, and hoping that by chance, the Squire might have been wise and not attempted to get home to-night, for surely he ought to have been back long ago had he only set out in good time. They don't think much of wild weather up in those northern lands, but to-night was rough enough to make even the most weather-hardened native uneasy. Moreover, a storm always seems to be worse to those who sit at home and wait for the return of some one who is out in it than it does to the traveler himself, who is struggling through its fury. Well, just as they were finishing their supper, there came suddenly a great rapping and knocking at the door, which, being of that kind that is invariably the harbinger of bad news, made the old couple spring to their feet, and old Joe hasten to unfasten bolts and locks.

A woman, wind-tossed and dripping with rain, stood outside. The faint light from within shone on her pale and frightened face; she had run so fast that she could scarcely speak through her halting breaths.

"Quick, quick! there has been an accident—your master is lying unconscious in the road—the

horse is dead—the cart is broken to bits.” Then she staggered into the kitchen and sank down breathlessly on the long wooden bench that curved round the rounded wall underneath the windows.

Tamthwaite rushed off at once to the barn stables hard by, to rouse two farm hands who slept in the loft, and to get out a wagon and the farm horses; his wife stood for a moment wringing her hands in helplessness.

“Oh, Miss Coulston, what shall I do?” she cried, looking appealingly at the drenched young woman, whose wringing garments were describing a circle of wet below her on the stone floor.

And then suddenly on the top of the real fright and shock of the accident, inspiration flashed like a heaven-born ray of light into young Mrs. Mathurin’s mind. She looked up at the woman with glittering eyes.

“*Do?*” she cried, “why, go too, with the cart, of course! Take brandy to pour down your master’s throat, and blankets to roll him up in, and a pillow for his head. Don’t you understand that the poor man may be dying; if he is left out there much longer without help, he *will* die. As soon as I’ve got my breath I will go to the village and get some one to find the doctor; go quick, now, with the wagon and the men, and you may save his life.”

Mrs. Tamthwaite did not need to be told twice. Women of her class, if they cannot initiate, know how to obey the orders of a superior intel-

ligence, and beneath her hard grim nature, Trafford's housekeeper kept a warm corner in her heart for her master. She had been born and bred in the service of his family; she had nursed him as an infant; she would willingly have been cut to pieces, if it could have done him any good, and it is quite certain that she had never hesitated to back him up in any of his schemes and designs, however unjust and iniquitous they might be.

In very few minutes the covered wagon had set forth, the three men with lanterns walking at the horses' heads, the woman sitting on the hay at the bottom of the cart with her blankets and her brandy and other restoratives about her. Edna found herself left alone in the kitchen. In the consternation and confusion of the start of the relief party, the Tamthwaites, both husband and wife, had totally forgotten the prisoner upstairs. During the course of the visit of the morning, Edna had discovered that the girl who helped Mrs. Tamthwaite with the housework did not sleep at the Tower, but went to her home every evening after her tea. She knew, therefore, that she was alone and safe.

She waited till the last flicker of the vanishing lanterns had disappeared below the dip of the hill towards the bridge, then a few more seconds to give them time to reach the place where the roads divided—the right-hand road going due south towards the village, the left-hand road trending upwards towards the moors.

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Then she rose from her place, walked softly across the kitchen, and, detaching the iron keys from their nail near the door, she vanished swiftly up the spiral stone staircase.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ESCAPE AND EXPLANATION.

THE two young women ran as hard as they could towards the village. By good fortune the rain had ceased, though the wind still screamed roughly and fiercely, taking away their breath, howling dismally across the hills so that they could scarcely hear each other's voices;—not that they had, in any case, much breath for speech; they just held on to each other and ran. A few gasping words had, indeed, been exchanged between them. Edna had tried to tell Marvie briefly of the accident.

"Is he much hurt?" Marvie asked.

"Can't say—he may be dead."

"Dead—but what—why—?"

"Oh, perhaps I killed him," Edna answered at random. At the moment she hardly cared—the joy of victory was hers,

Near the village public-house the vehicle she had ordered was waiting for them. A covered wagonette drawn by two strong little horses, who were used to the hills and made nothing of them. But the way to the station was long and tiring—the ten miles of rough roads over which the broken springs of the wagonette jogged wearily

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seemed to be an interminable period of utter misery. The storm, however, was dying away in the west by now, and the station lights gleamed welcome at last. It was a small uncomfortable station, wet and draughty, where they had to wait fireless and foodless for over an hour for the night down train. But neither of them cared much ; small hardships counted for nothing now. When, at last, the train came, Edna flung herself down upon the seat of the empty carriage they were lucky enough to secure, and was almost immediately sound asleep. Physical exhaustion and the reaction of what she had attempted and achieved overcame her altogether, and the jolting of the train only served to rock her slumbers.

But Marvie lay wide awake along the opposite seat. No kindly sleep came to woo her to forgetfulness, or to help her through the agony of her self-reproach during those long hours of wakefulness. Her tired eyes ached in the darkness, the light of fever shone in their sad depths and burnt in her flushed red cheeks and parched lips. She remembered that only a few days ago she had come along this same railway line of her own free will, radiant, triumphant, full of hope and of happiness. And now she was retracing her steps, a broken and disillusioned woman, and, ah ! worse, far worse ! disgraced and shamed as well in the eyes of all her fellow men and women. She seemed to see now, as she had never been able to see whilst the flames of passion had blinded

her, what the meaning of it all was, and how fatally she had flung away that fair and precious gift of herself that she had held far too cheaply, and that he to whom she had offered it so generously had esteemed so lightly. She had been mad indeed, and even now, although she had been glad to escape from that living tomb of misfortune—even now she was hardly certain whether she was sane again.

In the early dawn of the cold gray morning she came over and knelt by her stepmother's side, feverishly clasping her cool hands and calling her by her name.

"Edna, Edna! wake up! I cannot bear it any longer alone!"

In a second Mrs. Mathurin was wide awake and had risen to a sitting posture. Marvie's hot dry hands clung to her like burning coals.

"You said he was killed," panted the girl, "did you mean it?—did you mean it?"

"My dear girl, no! nought never comes to grief," replied Edna, emphatically, with a laugh which only half concealed the nervousness those hot hands awoke in her. She tried to replace Marvie on her seat and to cover her shivering body with a rug, but Marvie was not to be soothed like a sick child.

"Ah, for heaven's sake don't joke," she cried, a little wildly, "what is a jest to you is bitter reality to me; you don't understand. After all, he was something to me; unworthy of love, I dare say—but how many unworthy men have been

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passionately loved by women?—far better women than I, and he was one of those whom women could not help loving. You do not understand—you do not know him.”

“Ah, do I not?” cried Edna, with a sudden bitterness; “do I not know him and understand him, better, oh, much better than you do, Marvie!”

The girl gazed at her in astonishment.

“You—you?” she said, wonderingly.

“Yes, I. You are surprised. Go and lie down in your place again, my dear, and I will tell you.”

Marvie allowed herself to be placed once more on the narrow couch, and Edna tucked her carefully up in all the wraps that were available.

“Has it not struck you as strange that I should have found you so easily, Marvie? Trafford Tower is a very out-of-the-way place. It lies ten miles from the railway, you know, and in the heart of those barren Cheviot hills, where there are no towns, and only small scattered villages far apart from each other. And yet I did not lose much time, did I, in tracking you to this out-of-the-world hiding-place? One day I waited at home; one night I spent in town because I was obliged to go to the office for money, and the very next night I was sleeping close to you, under a very humble stone-thatched roof in Trafford Dale! Do you not wonder how I came to go there so directly and simply?”

Marvie had not thought of it before, yet now it certainly did strike her as strange and unaccountable. Edna's appearance in her prison

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room had seemed like a miracle, whose workings she had not at first endeavored to unravel. Yet now, all at once, her wonder grew—and the enigma appeared to be inexplicable.

"My dear Marvie," Edna continued, "Trafford Dale is my native place. I was born there," she went on smiling. "All the older people remember me well as a little toddling baby, and saw me grow up amongst them. Trafford Tower in its grim gray ghostliness is one of my earliest recollections. I was born in Trafford vicarage; in Trafford church they christened me, and in Trafford churchyard they buried my father."

"And—you knew Claude?"

"Yes, I knew—Claude," she answered, "and, Marvie, I too—I too have also loved him."

"It is you, then, *you*, who were that clergyman's daughter whom he loved, and whom he deserted?"

"Where did you hear that?" asked Edna, sharply.

"Sophy Wishaw told me something."

"And had told you wrong, as such a woman as Lady Wishaw would be sure to do! Claude Trafford did not desert me, Marvie—it was I who deserted him. Yet I do not deny that he broke my heart. That is his way. Listen, and I will tell you about it. I was very young and very ignorant. My father, during the last years of his life, was a confirmed invalid. I was left to wander about the country just as I liked. There were no neighbors of my own class to befriend me

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look after me—I was mostly alone. Claude had known me as a child ; he was always kind and friendly to me, and I, childlike, had for him, even then, one of those romantic adorations which are not uncommon to little girls of ten years old. Then for years I never saw him save at long intervals, for his visits to the Tower were brief and rare. His father owned another place in Shropshire ; they lived there altogether, and Claude's flying visits to the old Tower were taken to be in connection with certain rents and dues which he came to collect, acting, as he did, as his father's agent. After his father's death, a long interval of two years elapsed during which I never saw him at all. If I had had young companions of my own age, or if my poor father had been well enough to go about with me, or even if I had ever gone away for a pleasant change of scene and air, I think I should, in all probability, have forgotten Claude Trafford. But I was so completely alone, that it is perhaps small wonder that his memory seemed to be the only thing I had to cherish and adore. I thought of him incessantly, worshipped him secretly, and raised him into a sort of hero and god in my foolish imagination. Then one summer he came back, and I met him by accident, the day after he arrived, on the bridge. We talked together for a long time. He seemed delighted to see me again, and I told him readily all about myself. He took pains to please me, and seemed to take the keenest interest in every detail of my life. He soon drew

from me all my little childish secrets, and the story of my heart must, from the very first, have been as clear as daylight to his eyes. His wooing was a dream of delight—his charming manner, the caressing tones of his wonderful voice, the fascination which is a part of himself. Ah! I need not describe them, Marvie—you know them as well as I do. We met often by appointment, either on the hills by day, or else in the shadows of the vicarage garden by night under the stars. The long summer days were warm and balmy; he had come for two weeks; he remained for two months. The wonder is, not that I was in love with him, but that he apparently was in love with me. I think he did actually love me at that time. He is always in earnest at the moment, you know—that is what, perhaps, makes him so dangerous.

“Our love-making might have gone on indefinitely, but that an unforeseen circumstance brought it to an end. My poor father, who had long been an invalid, died somewhat suddenly, and I was left alone in the world. Was it not natural that I should turn in my first agony of sorrow with confident yearning to my lover? There was now—so I thought in my ignorance—no barrier to our union; the love which he had asked me for was his. In a passion of natural grief I flung myself into his arms, and declaring that I had nobody now on earth but him begged him to let our marriage take place immediately.

“Then—there came first a silence. Had I

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been older and wiser I might have been struck by it. But I suspected nothing. After a moment he began to speak. To this hour I cannot exactly recollect what he said. I heard him at first as one that is deaf, through a mist; his words seemed to convey no meaning to my mind, and still his voice went on and on—till at last some of it pierced through the veil of numbness and I began to understand. Marriage was not for him. I ought to have guessed that; he had, he was sure, made it clear to me over and over again. Other people in any case, would have told me, had I taken the trouble to inquire; he was not free like other men—and so, little by little, to my addled and bewildered wits, the blow struck home at last.

“He was married already!

“I suppose I must have fainted, for a darkness like death itself came over me. When next I remember anything, I found myself lying on the grass under the apple trees of the orchard and he was bathing my face with a wet handkerchief, which he had dipped into the babbling beck close by.

“I rose with difficulty, and recollection returned slowly to me. After that came immediately the last act of the drama, and that was more of a nightmare than all the rest put together. I had believed myself to be Claud Trafford’s promised wife; he asked me now to be his mistress!

“The very day of my father’s funeral, as soon as the brief sad service was over, I left my child-

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hood's home forever. An old friend of my mother's gave me a temporary shelter in London, and it was through her help that I succeeded in getting an engagement as a nursery governess in an Australian family, who were going back to Sydney in a week's time. You know all the rest, Marvie. But, I have told you, now, more than I have ever told to any one else."

"My father—does he not know?"

Edna shook her head. "It is not in my nature to tell things; silence is best, unless, by speaking, one can help some one else. That is why I have spoken now."

For some long minutes there was silence, and in the noisy darkness of the throbbing train, these two hearts, so long estranged, drew very near to one another.

Suddenly Marvie tightened her grasp upon her companion's hands. "To me, also," she said, in a voice that seemed suffocated by the shame of it, "was that last degradation offered."

"He would not have married you, then?"

"No—for he would not give up his wife's money."

"Then, thank God, Marvie, that you are quit of him! What sort of husband do you imagine such a man would have made?"

But the girl had hidden her face against the hard cloth cushion of the railway carriage, and was sobbing her heart out. Edna let her be. Love may be trampled on, outraged, degraded, but it does not, for all that, die without a bitter

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struggle of agony. And young Mrs. Mathurin's own past experience helped her to understand. That is, indeed, perhaps the fundamental cause of all human suffering—that we should learn by it and through it the secret of true sympathy. Edna had learnt the lesson which sorrow teaches. Once more, before the travelers reached home, after that long and weary journey, did Marvie speak on the subject which filled both their hearts.

“Have you written to my father?” she asked.

“My dear Marvie! what do you take me for,” and Edna really laughed at the absurdity of the idea.

“And—and Ray? You said you went to the office?”

“That was to get money for the journey.”

“But you saw Ray?”

“Yes—just for a moment.”

“Did you tell Ray—that—that I had gone away?”

“My dear child, am I an idiot? Why should I tell Ray—or anybody? My object has been to hide and not to expose what you have done. I have told the servants you were staying with Aunt George. Lady Wishaw, whom I had to go and see first to find if you were there, will, I hope and trust, believe the same, for that is what I told her. If any questions arise elsewhere, they can easily be answered in the same way. You and I come back together, do you see—that knocks the bottom out of ill-natured remarks. The whole

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incident can be wiped out and forgotten—and neither your father nor Ray need ever hear a word about it.”

But Marvie shook her head.

“You are a good sort, Edna,” she said, sadly, “but you and I are not alike. I don’t care, of course, about Sophy Wishaw and people of that kind—what harm can she do me?—but there has been too much concealment already, and I cannot go on living under the shadow of a lie. My father will have to be told the truth—Ray—Ray also. My father may forgive me, but Ray never will—never!”

Edna thought she knew better.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TURNING THE TABLES.

THE news of the neighborhood was the sudden death of Sir William Wishaw. He was not a young man, of course, but he had always been hale and hearty for his years, and nobody had suspected, until the doctor said so after he was dead, that there had been anything the matter with his heart. He died in his sleep during the night—it was to be hoped without consciousness and without pain, as no one was with him, and the fact only became known to his household when his valet went in to his room in the morning to call him. He had then apparently been dead for some hours.

It was quite in the fitness of things that Lady Wishaw should have been at a ball in the neighborhood that night, from which she had not returned till three o'clock in the morning. She did not go into her husband's room on her return, and the news of his death was brought to her by her maid when she came in with her early cup of tea.

At that ball—to which, it transpired at the inquest, Sir William had declined to accompany her,

pleading slight indisposition—no one had danced harder, laughed louder, or seemed to be more completely free from care than pretty Lady Wishaw!

“Poor thing!” said the compassionate neighbors afterwards, who knew very little about her, how terrible for her, to have been dancing whilst her husband lay dying! One would think she can never forgive herself; it will haunt her for life!” Decidedly they knew very little about her!

Lady Wishaw was certainly very much upset, but her distress partook rather of the nature of annoyance than of grief. She was very much put out with Bill for dying now. She had only just succeeded in persuading him to take a furnished house in town till the end of the season—having induced him to do so out of consideration for her own health and spirits. She was suffering, she had told him, from depression, and wanted the stimulus of London life to cheer her up. Sir William had grumbled a great deal, for he hated London, but in the end she had cajoled and coaxed him into doing what she wanted, and the agreement for the house in Pont Street that she coveted had only been signed two days ago. He could hardly have taken it into his head to die at a more inconvenient moment, she told herself, with an anger which she considered to be perfectly pardonable! The house must be given up, of course; and instead of those lovely frocks for her London outing, which already lay half com-

pleted at her dressmaker's, she would have to cover herself up in the trappings of deep woe, and remain for months in decent seclusion in the country !

She shed many bitter tears of self-pity during the first few days of her widowhood, but not one that was of genuine regret for the good old husband who had always been kind and indulgent to her.

The funeral, again, was a dreadful annoyance to her. The house was perforce invaded by the detested relations of her late husband, whom she had always hated, root and branch, and who, it must be confessed, had never been very civil to her, having neither liked nor approved of her.

There was, of course, to begin with, that horrible Moreton Wishaw—who was now the baronet in his brother's place—and his stuck-up wife. These people had always believed the worst of her, and had tried, she knew, to injure her in her husband's estimation. She refused now to see them, although Moreton sent a very respectful message to her door requesting that she would grant him an interview. The man, if he was hard, was, at any rate, just, and he was perhaps sorry for her—and, in any case, wished to do what was right and proper by his brother's widow. But Sophy was of a vindictive nature, and would not meet his friendly advances. She had not forgiven him for that telegram he had sent to her husband on the occasion of his having seen her at the Empire with Claude Trafford. That was

a mean trick, she said to herself, and she would never forget it.

Thinking of Trafford reminded her of other more recent grievances of another kind, over which she ground her teeth in bitter rage—muttering dire things concerning vipers and their deserts betwixt them—and vowing to be even yet with all such troublers of her peace of mind. So she would not see her brother-in-law, nor would she go to the funeral and stand by his side over her husband's coffin.

But when, later on, the party of black-robed relatives assembled in the library so that the will might be read by the Wishaw family lawyer, Sophy, Lady Wishaw, all in the panoply of *crépe* and cap and weepers, and leaning upon the arm of her own solicitor, swept suddenly into the astonished circle of expectant relations. She took no sort of notice of any of them—treating them as though they did not exist—but stalked up to the head of the table as by right, where a chair having been hastily placed for her, she subsided into it with a rustle of silk and crape, and lifting her long-handled glasses to her eyes, stared at them all, arrogantly and defiantly. Anything less like a sorrowing widow in the first hours of her bereavement it would be difficult to imagine, and certainly there were no traces of grief or tears to be descried upon her pretty pink and white little face. There was even a something of triumph in the quick, keen glances of the restless blue eyes, and in the scornful curl of her rosebud mouth.

She knew very well that they were all hoping for legacies and bequests, and she had come to enjoy the discomfiture they would experience at getting nothing. For Sophy had known too well how to feather her own nest to have any fears concerning the disposal of her husband's worldly affairs.

And the result fully bore out her anticipations. Sir William Wishaw's ample fortune did not accrue to him from the revenues of Fairfield Hall, which was, in truth, a very unremunerative property. His riches were derived from widely different sources. He was a large shareholder in coal mines in Yorkshire, and in slate quarries in Wales; he had speculated successfully for many years past in gold and in silver mines, and had always been fortunate in his ventures, buying in the lowest markets and selling at the very top of the 'boom' when it came. And so, by degrees, he had accumulated wealth, and had died an extremely rich man. How rich, few people, save his wife, really knew. His brother had, of course, been partly aware that he would have a great deal to bequeath, and no doubt his hopes and expectations ran riot within him. But now, when the will came to be read, it became very soon borne in upon the dismayed mind of the new baronet, that beyond the house and property of Fairfield, which was strictly entailed, and could not be alienated from him, there would be nothing at all for him out of his brother's great wealth.

He was not, indeed, left a sufficient income to

keep the place up properly, or to live upon it himself, for Fairfield, although a pretty place, was a very unremunerative one.

Everything had been left unreservedly to "my dear wife, Sophy Louisa Wishaw." The only exceptions were certain heirlooms, such as old plate, family pictures, and some of the diamonds, which could not be diverted from the entailed estate.

Sophy's own diamonds were magnificent, and had been all bestowed upon her by the generosity of her husband. He had, moreover, left her a very charming and comfortable moderate-sized manor house, standing in about ten acres of gardens and meadow lands, and situated about two miles from the park gates of Fairfield Hall. Sir William had lately purchased this house, having specially designed it to be a dower house for his widow after his own death.

There were just a few legacies of money to old servants, and some remembrances—a scarf pin here, a pair of sleeve-links there, to one or two old friends of his bachelor days; but to his brothers and his sisters, and his cousins, and his aunts, nothing at all.

Sophy, sweeping her eyes round the circle of mourners, scanned their blank faces with a small smile of infinite satisfaction. It was the hour of her triumph, and she would have been more than mortal had she not enjoyed it.

She knew that one and all of them had, at divers times, plotted and schemed to ruin her—bringing tales of her doings, and rumors of

scandals, to her husband's ears, in order to destroy his confidence in her, and to weaken her hold upon him ; but they had all failed in their endeavors to harm her in his estimation, and her influence had rather been strengthened than weakened by their ill-advised efforts. It is hardly ever a wise thing to interfere between a husband and wife, however just and however rightly called forth such interference may be. The strong basis of conjugal sympathy is almost certain to defeat all outside attacks, and no one knows a man so well as his own wife does. She holds all the trump cards to start with, and can be safely trusted to win her own game in the long run.

Sophy, at any rate, had won hers, little as she had deserved the dead man's love and confidence, he had died—as she had intended him to do—loving and trusting her to the end. So he had left to her everything in the world that was in his power to leave.

In that moment of exultation there was only one crumpled rose-leaf in her lot ; but, small as it was, that wrinkle irritated her very much indeed.

Amongst the small personal remembrances which Sir William had left to his friends, there occurred this one sentence : “ And to my cousin, Marvel Mathurin, I leave my gold snuff-box with miniature of her great grandmother, Lady Lares-ton, upon it set in diamonds.”

Now this legacy annoyed Sophy very much indeed, partly because the snuff-box was a valuable

one—the diamonds being particularly large and fine—and partly because Marvie was just now totally out of favor with her, and she would, consequently, rather that the snuff-box had been left to her lady's-maid than to the girl whom, only a short time ago, she had called her dearest friend.

But Sophy considered herself to have been badly treated by her dearest friend, and she was one of those small-minded people who never forgive an injury. She had, moreover, sworn to be even with Marvie Mathurin, and her husband's bequest only strengthened her in this resolution.

When the lawyer had finished the reading of of the will, had replaced it in its envelope, and had removed the spectacles from his nose, there arose immediately a great hubbub of conversation, chairs were pushed noisily away, and the relations gathered together in angry group; either they turned their backs upon the widow of the late baronet, or else they cast at her furious looks of indignation. Nor did they trouble to lower their voices whilst they animadverted upon her conduct, so that fragments of their abusive remarks came to her hearing from every side.

“Designing creature!”

“Undue influences!”

“Poor deluded fellow!”

“If he had only known all *we* know.”

“A disgraceful will.”

“His own flesh and blood sacrificed to that woman.”

“ Even his heir treated with gross injustice.”

And so on and so on.

At last Sophy, not being able to retort individually to each and all of these attacks, did that which put the finishing touch to her crimes in the eyes of her late husband's relations.

She laughed—quite audibly and merrily, as though she were enjoying the best good joke in the world !

The horrified silence which greeted that ebullition of amusement really afforded her immense satisfaction. There were no more rude remarks. For one moment they turned and looked at her with a sort of shocked amazement, and she knew that each, in his or her heart, was thinking—

“ She laughs, and her husband was buried an hour ago ! ” And then they trooped out of the room one after the other, till the only people left in the library were the lawyers, still sitting over the papers on the table, Sir Moreton and Lady Wishaw, and herself.

“ The will is all in order, I suppose ? ” she heard her brother-in-law ask, as he leant over the table.

“ Perfectly, Sir Moreton.” replied the solicitor.

“ Would there be any case for us if we try to upset it—undue influence ? or anything of that kind ? ” inquired the new Lady Wishaw.

“ Not a ghost of a case, my lady ; the will is perfectly in order, and was drawn up by ourselves less than a month ago, Sir William being, at the

time, in full possession of all his senses. I am very sorry," he added, with evident feeling ; " but unfortunately, nothing can be done."

Neither of the three made the slightest pretence of lowering their voices during the utterance of these observations ; and now Lady Wishaw, Moreton's wife, broke out angrily—

" It is a wicked will ! I call it a cruel shame that poor fool of a man should have been forced into flagrant injustice to his heir by the manœuvres of a designing woman ! "

" I will trouble you, madam, to keep a civil tongue in your head, and to speak with respect of my late husband."

Sophy's voice rang sharp and keen. She was in her rights this time, and was not slow to take the point of vantage ; and then her own solicitor rose and spoke—with some hesitation, certainly, but also to the point.

" Excuse me—a—Lady Wishaw, I cannot allow any aspersions upon the good faith—of—a—my client—without entering a—a protest—if you will allow me to say so."

Sir Moreton briefly bade his wife hold her tongue. Then, looking up at his sister-in-law, he said, with much bitterness :

" You might, I think, have allowed my poor brother to leave me sufficient money to keep up the house and to live in it. As things are, I shall be obliged to let it on a long lease, and I can never hope to live in it myself. It would not have made a very sensible difference in your

means if you had permitted him to divert a suitable sum for the maintenance of the house of his fathers from the more than sufficient, the magnificent, income, I may say, which I admit he was quite justified in leaving to his widow. I cannot conceive why you permitted him to be guilty of the cruel injustice of leaving me penniless—with fresh responsibilities I have no means of fulfilling. Why did you do it, Sophy ? ”

“ Would you like to know ? Come here, then, and I will tell you.”

She drew him aside into the embrasure of a window.

“ Do you remember a telegram you sent last May to Bill when he was in Scotland ? ”

“ A telegram ? ” he repeated, doubtfully ; no—I cannot recall it.”

“ I will recall it to your mind then. Bill was in Scotland for a few days, and I was in London. You met me coming out of the Empire——”

“ Ah, yes, of course, I remember. You were doing what I know my poor brother had forbidden you to do, and in the company of a man of the worst character with regard to women. Well,” and Moreton drew himself up stiffly, “ I did what I conceived to be my duty, and I do not regret it.”

“ Do you not ? Oh, but yes, I think you do regret it very much now—to-day—after hearing my husband’s will ! ”

“ You mean to say that—that—” he stammered.

“ Exactly. I mean that up to that time Bill

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had intended to leave you forty-five thousand pounds for the maintenance of this house and estate, but that, after that little incident of the telegram, and my explanation of your conduct in the matter, he tore up that will, and made a new one—the one that you have just heard read. It was *your* day then—it is mine to-day! Do you see?"

And see he did.

CHAPTER XXV.

SOPHY DOES HER WORST.

IN these days Ray Mathurin, had he not been an extremely busy man, might, very probably, have been a very miserable one. Work is fortunately, however, the best antidote in the world for a troubled mind, and he who has no leisure to brood over his griefs has already more than half overcome them. His uncle's absence threw an immense amount of responsibility upon Ray's shoulders just now, and business matters filled the whole of his days almost to the exclusion of all other thoughts.

There were necessarily, however, certain intervals, during which he had time to brood over his own affairs, and when disquietude and dissatisfaction gained the upper hand, with the natural result of sleepless nights and a total loss of hope and of appetite.

Something, he knew not what, was out of gear at Western Lodge. Edna had told him not to come down, and, having a good deal of faith in Edna, he had obeyed her orders, but he did so very unwillingly.

He knew that both Mrs. Mathurin and Marvie had been away, for Edna had called at the office

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one day to ask him for money, and he had gathered from her remarks, which had, however, been rather vague, that both ladies had come to town on an expedition connected with shopping and theaters. But when he had volunteered to escort them to a play, and asked if he might call upon them at Aunt George's house in Regent's Park, where he took it for granted that they were staying, Mrs. Mathurin had declined his offers and discouraged his proposal. Their time, she said, evasively, was fully filled up—they were, indeed, engaged every night, and there would be no object in his calling, as he would not find them at home. Ray was a little hurt, certainly, but there was nothing for it but to bow to her decision. Some three or four days later he received a letter from Edna. They were back again at Western Lodge, and Marvie was not very well—nothing at all to be anxious about; he was not to be uneasy in the least, it was only a little feverish attack brought on by the hot weather; she would soon be all right, but she was writing to ask him not to come down for the present. What Marvie chiefly needed was quiet and rest; any little excitement would be bad for her just now. She, Edna, wanted to get her quite strong again before her father came back—and so on. It was all very incomprehensible and very unsatisfactory, but Ray could not force himself upon the ladies if they did not want him, so he stayed in town, and was more or less miserable; and on all those warm Sundays in July, when London feels so stuffy

and oppressive, his heart ached for the green lawn and the garden gay with flowers, and for the sight of Marvie in a cotton dress wandering under the garlanded arches of the pergola. He used to picture that garden to himself, with her as a queen of all the roses therein, with a longing that was almost a physical pain. Then mercifully the hot dusty Sunday came to an end, the sleepless night was over and Monday morning and hard work drove back the pain which the idle day had fostered, so that it was quickly swallowed up by the practical and dry-as-dust details of his morning's correspondence that lay waiting for him in a great heap on his desk at the office.

Oh, blessed boon of labor! best consoler on earth to those who fret and grieve and wear themselves out in hopeless longings! Can pleasure, can wealth, can religion even—afford to the stung and wounded heart half so real and substantial a help as mental work honestly and faithfully pursued? It is, indeed, the best of all aids to the soul that sorrows, for nothing under the sun drowns thought so entirely, and to those only who have no leisure to think, there comes peace.

So Ray, recognizing this truth, flung himself heart and soul into his daily work, and kept his wretchedness at bay thereby.

But Sundays continued to be a very terrible ordeal to him. He had no heart to go elsewhere, although he had plenty of pleasant invitations from friends and acquaintances, but he had been accustomed to spend his 'week-ends,' as the first

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day of the week has come incorrectly to be called, at Western Lodge. It was 'home' to him in every sense of the word, and anything less than home had no attraction for him.

Edna had told him not to come, and he would have obeyed her probably to the end of the chapter, had unforeseen incidents not occurred. If there was one person upon the face of the earth whom Ray Mathurin disliked and distrusted, it was Sophy, Lady Wishaw. It was, therefore, with something like consternation that, jumping quickly one day, towards the end of July, into a first-class compartment of the underground railway at the Mansion House station, he found himself face to face with this particular object of his aversion.

Sophy, who was in the deepest trappings of widows' "first mourning," as the dressmakers call it, uttered a little exclamation of surprise and held out her hand.

"Mr. Mathurin! what an unexpected pleasure! How small the world is, to be sure!"

Ray made no reply to this truism, save by an almost inaudible inquiry as to the lady's health. He really felt rather embarrassed, for Sir William Wishaw had been dead only a fortnight, and it seems rather difficult always to begin a conversation on ordinary matters with a widow of so recent a date. Lady Wishaw, however, was quite ready to talk, and, upon further observation, Ray was not able to discover any traces of overwhelming woe in her appearance. She looked, on the

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contrary, extremely well. The deep mourning suited her fair hair and clear complexion, and there was an indefinable air of prosperity and well-being about her whole person.

"Thanks, I'm all right," she said, shortly, in answer to his murmured query. "I've just been into the city about some of my investments. I suppose you know that my dear husband left me a very considerable fortune?"

"Yes. I am glad you have at least no money anxieties to increase your great sorrow," replied Ray, gravely.

"Ah, yes, thanks. Of course it's *dreadful* losing dear Bill; he was so devoted to me, dear old thing," and Sophy dabbed her perfectly dry eyes with a black-edged pocket handkerchief. "But he has been most generous to me. I am getting into my new house almost directly; the furniture is to go in next week. It will be very nice and pretty when it is all arranged and the pictures up; all the water colors were left to me, you know; of course, Sir Moreton has the family portraits, and I'm sure he is welcome to *them*, they are so ugly—but I shall have quite enough to make Aldbury nice. Do you know the house, Mr. Mathurin, just two miles along the Hillborough road? nearer to you really; it stands back a little from the road, and there is quite a charming garden."

Ray replied that he did not remember the house.

"Oh, you must come and see me very soon.

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Come and spend a Sunday with me as soon as I am settled, will you?" Then noticing the undisguised astonishment in the young man's eyes, she added, with a laugh: "Oh, I don't look upon you as a stranger, Mr. Mathurin. Why, you are almost like a cousin, you know."

"I am no relation to you whatever, Lady Wishaw," said Ray, with somewhat uncomplimentary directness.

But Sophy was not at all offended. It had just come into her mind that it would be rather amusing—*pour passer le temps*—to flirt with this very straight-laced, but decidedly good-looking, young fellow. She felt sure she could make him fall in love with her very easily—and that would certainly annoy Marvie, who naturally looked upon her cousin as her own special property.

"Tit for tat," said Sophy, lightly to herself. "She has meddled with my men; it's only fair I should meddle a bit with hers." But the scheme seemed likely to be crushed in the bud.

Ray answered coldly and unresponsively, and with a deadly politeness which was more galling to her than if he had been rude.

"I am very much obliged to you for your kind thought of me, Lady Wishaw, and am sorry that I am unable to accept your invitation; but when I go out of town for Sunday, I invariably go home—I mean to my uncle's—Western Lodge."

Then Sophy, feeling herself to be snubbed, waxed dangerous.

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"Ah!" she said, lightly, "of course, I forgot. Have you been at Western Lodge lately?" and she looked at him keenly. Ray, being a mere male muddler, blushed, and answered rather confusedly:

"Not—not so very lately."

"Ah, I thought not. How, by the way, is Marvie, after her escapade?"

"I don't understand you, Lady Wishaw."

"Don't you? Oh, I thought, of course, you would know all about it."

"About what?" Ray stiffening himself into iron, and the direct look in his blue eyes was ominous.

Sophy uttered a little laugh. "Oh, if you don't know, of course, I needn't ask you," she said, airily. "I only thought, as you were her cousin, and such a great friend too, that you would probably know—what—what—" and after a pause, she added, "what everybody else is talking about."

Ray's color rose—not from confusion this time, but from wrath.

The train was just slackening into Charing Cross station, at which he was due to alight, but his business must wait now—he had no thought of leaving the train. By good luck he was alone in the carriage with her, and he meant to have this matter out.

"That won't do, Lady Wishaw," he said, quietly, but very determinedly, as the train moved on again. "I must have an explanation, if you please."

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"Oh, pray, don't drag me into the subject," she said, turning her head about a little uneasily, for she began to feel that she might possibly have evoked a storm that it would be difficult to quell.

"It is you who have dragged the subject forward; and now you will have to speak plainly. You said, if you will remember, that my cousin Marvie had had an 'escapade.' What did you mean by that?"

"Oh, well, I haven't a dictionary in my pocket. What does escapade mean? An *escape*, I suppose; literally, a trip, a frolic—something of that kind is the general meaning of the word."

"What is the particular meaning of it in this instance, and as applied to Marvie?" persisted Ray.

Lady Wishaw began to wish she had never mentioned Marvie. This young man was really most disagreeably determined, and there was a look in his face that positively frightened her—he looked murderous.

"Oh, what a mountain out of a mole-hill," she exclaimed, trying to back out of it into playfulness. "Why, surely you knew that Marvie had been away from home since her father's departure to America; that's all I meant."

"Marvie was certainly up in town with her stepmother a short time ago," replied Ray. "They were stopping with my great-aunt, Mrs. George Mathurin, in Regent's Park."

Sophy Wishaw opened her eyes very wide at that.

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"*In—deed?*" she cried. "At Mrs. George Mathurin's, was she? And you really believe *that*, Mr. Mathurin? What on earth makes you think so?"

"Because young Mrs. Mathurin told me so," said Ray, stoutly.

"And young Mrs. Mathurin is incapable of a lie—of course. Well, blessed are the pure in heart and the meek, and those that believe everything they are told, and so on; and here is my station, Mr. Mathurin, so now I must get out and wish you good-morning."

And then Ray pounced upon her. Whether he was justified or not, I cannot be sure; whether the laws of courtesy and of a gentleman's behavior towards a lady were or were not unduly transgressed, may be a matter of doubt. I can only record what happened, and what happened was this: just as the lady was rising to leave her place, with her hand on the catch of the door, he caught her firmly by the wrists and forcibly pushed her back into her seat, holding her there by might and main until the train began to move on again.

He was pale now with anger, and there was a fierce light not good to see in the glitter of his steel-blue eyes. It was nature—one of those strong primary passions of man's essence which underlie all the veneer and the varnish of modern civilization, that now and then, in the story of a life, crops up clean and unadulterated from the soil to the surface—this it was which shone now in Ray's

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wrathful eyes : the leap of the human animal within him for the defence of that which was most sacred to him. And the woman was frightened. For a moment it looked as though Ray were about to strangle her.

"Neither you nor I leave this train," he said, in a low stern voice, "until you explain your words fully—or else eat them."

"Oh, really ; I was never so insulted in my life," she gasped. "You hurt me, Mr. Mathurin ; leave go of my wrists, you are pinching them."

He dropped her hands with a little laugh of derision, and sat down again opposite to her.

And then Sophy began to cry—in earnest this time—tears of temper and of fright. She wanted to gain time, for she was afraid to speak, and she hoped if she staved off the explanation till the next station she might call the guard to her assistance and manage to escape. But, unfortunately, Ray also knew that the time was short, and saw through her manœuvre.

"It's no use crying," he said, coldly, "because even if you go on putting me off till we stop at the next station, and even if you manage to get out there, I shall not leave you ; I shall get out with you and follow you wherever you go, until you have answered my question. Remember that you have made vague insinuations and accusations against Marvie, who is not only my first cousin—so that in her father's absence I stand in his place as her nearest male relation—but that she is also the dearest and most precious thing on

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earth to me, and that it is my earnest desire, as well as my fixed determination, to make her my wife. I have, therefore, a right to know what you mean. Tell me, at once, what is this 'escapade' about which you know, and which you are surprised to find I do not!"

Sophy dried her tears. They were not worth keeping up, she felt, with a man of this sort; they did not arouse his sympathy, and, moreover, as he had confessed to a virtuous passion for his cousin, he was evidently unlikely to make love to herself. His calmness, however, allayed her bodily fear, although it only served to fan the flame of her temper. Nothing was left to her now but to injure her quondam best friend as much as she knew how. And Sophy always enjoyed that process very much indeed.

"Oh, very well," she said, in a voice of cool contempt, "if you *will* have it, you shall. I wanted to spare you pain, but you have behaved so violently and badly to me that I don't know why I should consider your feelings. Marvie went off with a man, whose name I need not tell you, and remained at his house in the country—a *bachelor's* house, mind you—for four whole days, after which the man got tired of her and sent her home. Men, of course, don't *marry* girls who do that kind of thing."

"It's a lie," he said, chokingly; and the train pounded on through the darkness.

"It is perfectly true," she continued. "Mrs. Mathurin, poor thing, did what she could: she

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came, first of all, to look for her at Fairfield—it was just a week before my dear husband died—and then, I suppose, she went up to London to try and find her, and did so on her return apparently, for they have reappeared together at Western Lodge, where young Mrs. Mathurin is doing her best to hush up the scandal, and to account for her stepdaughter's absence by illness, or what not. Very creditable to her, of course, poor soul."

"And, pray, how have you learnt all this infernal story, Lady Wishaw?" he asked at last, in a voice that shook with ill-subdued agitation.

"Very simply. The man—who shall be nameless for poor Marvie's sake—happens to be a friend of mine. He is laid up at his house by a carriage accident which occurred to him after he had sent her away, and he has amused himself by writing me a whole account of the affair."

"Which is a damned lie from beginning to end!" reiterated Ray, furiously.

Lady Wishaw gave a shrug.

"As you please; you can believe it or no, just as you like, of course. If you want any confirmation of my story, go up to your aunt's house in Regent's Park and inquire whether Marvie was there three weeks ago. I fancy you will find that Mrs. Mathurin was there by herself. Here is Sloane Square; will you allow me to get out now, please? I have come a long way beyond my destination, and shall have to take a cab back to my hotel."

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He got out and held open the carriage door for her in silence. As she passed him, she nodded back at him with a scornful laugh.

“You had better take my advice ; go and see your Aunt George. You will find out that I am quite right, I expect.”

CHAPTER XXVI.

RAY IS BAFFLED.

AND despite his own unutterable sense of shame, Ray did go and see his great-aunt that very afternoon.

The old lady, who, by reason of her disagreeable habit of fault-finding, was anything but popular with the members of her family, was genuinely astonished at receiving an afternoon visit from her great-nephew.

"Why, dear me, Ray!" she exclaimed, "I am sure it must be over a year since you have come to see me! To what do I owe the honor of this unexpected visit?"

And in her own mind she thought: "He is hard up, and he wants me to lend him some money!—but I shan't."

Ray could only apologize for his remissness in the matter of calling, and plead the claims of business.

"Oh, yes!" with a toss of the head; "business! business! I've heard that before. When you men don't want to do anything, you all say 'business' is in the way; but if you want to do a thing, I have always found that business doesn't stand much chance against inclination!"

Ray felt this to be so indisputably true that he could make no reply.

"Therefore, you see, I am forced to conclude that it's pleasure that brings you," concluded the old lady, sarcastically; "so have some tea."

Aunt George's tea was notorious for its badness; it had every fault that tea could possibly have. It was of an inferior quality to begin with, and had generally stood much too long; it was always lukewarm, and possessed, moreover, a subtle flavor as of mingled rusty nails and soap-suds, that was conducive not to refreshment but to nausea. Ray knew Aunt George's tea of old, yet he submitted to it like a lamb, being anxious to conciliate rather than to irritate her.

After he had gulped down about half of the nasty tepid fluid, he set his cup down on the tray and began to converse.

With a preliminary canter concerning the weather, the pictures in the Academy, the cat show at the Crystal Palace, the spread of small-pox, and the sinfulness of the anti-vaccinationist, he asked her, quite casually, whether she had heard lately from Western Lodge.

Aunt George drew herself up, and said acidly: "Dear me, no! Your cousin Marvel does not often pay me the compliment of writing to me. Young people nowadays have not been taught to be civil to their elders and betters."

"Oh, well; but, you see, Marvie was here so very lately."

"Here? Marvel here? When, pray?"

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Ray colored. "I—I understood that she stayed with you for two or three days only a few weeks ago."

"You understood wrong, then. She has not stayed here for over a year, and then it was for one night only, entirely to suit her own convenience."

"But Edna was here, surely? I saw her when she was in town—she came to the office—and I certainly gathered——"

"Gathered *wool*, I should say; that's what young people's wits very often do gather! If you are talking of young Mrs. Mathurin, she has never set foot within my doors, and I'm not sure that I am at all sorry for it. I do not approve of that young woman. To begin with, who is she? where did she come from? out of what gutter did your Uncle Arthur pick her up? We positively know nothing about her!"

"It was the very best day's work Uncle Arthur ever did in his life when he married her!" cried Ray, hotly. Not for all the sick misery at his heart could he sit by and hear his uncle's wife abused.

"Well, I can't see it myself; as I always say, she has neither looks nor brains, neither birth nor manners; and she is bringing up that child disgracefully!"

"Little Jack? Why, he is the jolliest little kid in the world!"

"Ah, you wait and see what he will turn out by and by. Shamefully spoilt, I call him!—that class of woman always corrupts her children."

"I really cannot listen—" began Ray, angrily.

"I always say what I think," retorted Aunt George, nodding her head in its black wig at him. "I never flatter anybody."

"No, indeed!"

"And as to Marvel, why doesn't she marry? It must be her stepmother's fault. Has she had no proposals, I want to know?"

"Plenty, I should say."

"Then why doesn't she marry and get a home of her own? I tell you what it is—if she goes on much longer she will overstay her market. Girls' looks don't improve as they get older; and, really, I thought Marvel very much gone off indeed the last time I saw her, and that, as I told you, was a year ago."

Ray got up to go. He was afraid of losing his temper if he attempted to speak, so he got himself away out of the room with as few words as possible.

His visit had certainly been exceedingly disagreeable, but then he had learnt all he had come to find out—and bitter enough that knowledge was!

The blackness of despair seemed to close around him as he walked slowly away across the solitudes of the Regent's Park. He recognized, indeed, that he had no just cause for complaint against Edna; for, on thinking it over, he was sure now that she had never actually told him that they were stopping with Aunt George; it was he himself who had taken it for granted, and he re-

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membered now that he had said so, and that Edna had merely listened to the remark without contradicting it—that was what made him imagine that it was the case.

But this recollection brought him no consolation, for it only bore out in some degree the abominable story which Lady Wishaw had told him. In that story, in its entirety, Ray could and would not believe, yet evidently there was some kind of foundation for it.

And then, with a great sense of despair, the young man began to perceive that what had stood between Marvie and himself was not, as he had supposed, his own unworthiness or her own maiden reluctance to marriage, but actually the influence of another lover whom she cared for, and whose existence even he had never suspected. And this discovery was very terrible to him, all the more so, because, now he came to look back to the past, everything seemed to point this out to him as the cause of all his trouble. Her queer changeable moods, her rapid transitions from grave to gay, her odd unreasonableness, and, at times, the reproaches she had cast at herself, all now seemed to be accounted for and comprehended! Marvie had been in love and her love had rendered her unhappy! He thought, too, that Edna must have guessed it, although she had feared to pain him by telling him. The piecing together of this puzzle gave him infinite pain—not so much, indeed, on his own account as for the sake of her he loved.

Ray was one of those rare men who love unselfishly. Most men are very egotistic in their love—it is of how the great passion affects themselves and their own life that they chiefly think ; the woman is to such a man the complement and the crown of his own existence ; her life is bound up with his as long as she is necessary to his happiness. Let this necessity once be at an end, and he most usually does not care very much what becomes of her.

A woman's love is generally far more unselfish—it is of *him*, not of herself, that she thinks first, and, if needs be, she will sacrifice herself and be content to pass out of his life forever, if only by so doing she can secure the happiness or even the worldly welfare of the man she worships. And then there is also, here and there, a man like Ray Mathurin, to whom it is given to love unselfishly, with just a touch of that feminine tenderness of nature which alone can render human love a thing of God-like beauty.

I grant you that this type of love is rare ; but I think we woman have, most of us, met at least one instance of it in our lives.

And so, scarcely had the crushing blow of the hopelessness of his own cause fallen upon Ray Mathurin, than he began at once to think, not about his own sorrow, but about hers.

Who was this triple-dyed monster who had blackened his darling's life ? Where was he to be found so that he might wreak his vengeance upon him ?

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Yet, no!—there could be no vengeance, for Marvie loved him. However bad he might be, her love must render him scatheless; yet must he, in any case, be forced to do her justice.

Not for one moment did Ray believe the full intent of Sophy Wishaw's cruel accusations against the girl he loved. She might be sinned against, but never sinning. His pure, proud Marvie might have been capable of any rashness—of any folly even—but never of any act by which the whiteness of her womanhood could be tarnished; of that he was convinced, and angels from heaven could scarcely have persuaded him otherwise.

Ray knew Marvie, perhaps, better than did anyone else in the world; no one was more alive to her faults and failings than he was; and yet, in spite of all her shortcomings, he had come to be certain of the fineness of character that was the groundwork of her nature. He loved her, indeed, with all her faults—almost, at times, by reason of them—for there was nothing mean or despicable about her. Her strong prejudices, her violent antipathies, and proud disdains, were all, at least, honest and above-board; she was, he knew, as easily influenced for evil as for good, but the heart of her was sound and true, and she had, moreover, that strength of character that is never too proud to admit itself to be in the wrong when once convinced of the fact.

At one time he had hoped, indeed, that her love for himself might have given the softening

touch to the tantalizing bitter-sweetness of her nature, but now he found himself obliged to abandon that hope. Marvie loved, indeed—but instead of loving her old playmate and companion, who would have understood her so well, she had given her love to some stranger, who would surely never know how to guide and guard her, and who was, apparently, unworthy altogether of the great gift bestowed upon him.

And who was he? The question came back to that again.

Such as he was, he must be found and made the best of, and be made to marry her and make her happy.

If—as was seemingly the case—he had, however slightly, compromised her good name, to say nothing of her life's happiness, he must make such restitution of the wrong he had done her as was possible to him. And he, Ray, in the absence of her father, was assuredly the man to see that it was done.

If he could never hope now for Marvie's love, he could, at any rate, stand by her and protect her, and do all he could to give her the desire of her heart.

"And so, please God, I will!" he said to himself stoutly, as he let himself in to the door of his lodgings with his latch-key.

It was Friday afternoon. Edna had refused to receive him for a Saturday to Monday visit, and he could not well therefore, force himself into her house against her wishes. But nothing could

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prevent his going down by the early train on Sunday for a few hours. He would not even go into the house or the garden if Edna did not wish it; but he conceived himself to be in his rights in asking her to grant him an interview. So he wrote to her.

"DEAR EDNA,—I have heard something which makes it imperative that I should see you, even if you do not think it wise that I should see Marvie. Of course I wish to do nothing that could annoy either you or her. But in asking you to grant me an interview, I feel I am only taking the course which my duty to my cousin, and to my uncle in his absence, suggests to me; I therefore trust that you will comply with my request. I am coming down Sunday morning. The train arrives at 11.10. I should, therefore, be at the lodge gates at twenty minutes past eleven. Will you, for once, forego church, and meet me there? It is of the utmost importance that I should see you, so that, if I don't find you at the gate, I shall conclude you would prefer to see me at the house, and I shall go there.

"Yrs.,
RAYMOND."

Having posted this letter, he felt happier, and even believed that he would be able to sleep; but, of course, when night came—night, which always aggravates small troubles into great ones, and great troubles into mountains of unbearable weight—he could do nothing of the sort.

The personal aspect of his grief during those long dark hours awoke anew and gripped like a hand of iron at his heart, till the pain of the passion that lay ruined and blasted within him seemed to gnaw at his vitals like a dying animal in its agony; and there were moments during that endless night of horror when Ray not only prayed that he might die, but actually debated within himself the possibility of dying by his own hand.

But when daylight came he cried out upon himself for a craven-hearted coward.

What—die? when there was work still to be done in the world for Marvie?

Knock under, because things had gone wrong?—behave like a cur, and scuttle, instead of facing the foe like a man?

And when he had shaken off the ghosts of the night by a cold bath, and forced himself, somewhat against the grain, into the consumption of a not contemptible breakfast, Ray betook himself to the city, and worked like a nigger all the morning; and even when the clerks went away for the Saturday half-holiday, he stayed on in the deserted offices making up accounts and poring over dusty ledgers, till a splitting headache, that almost blinded him, forced him to put them back in their shelves, and to leave the work he was no longer capable of doing well behind him.

But somehow the Saturday had been got through—and to-morrow was Sunday!

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DREGS OF THE CUP.

MEANWHILE young Mrs. Mathurin had been fighting her battle too, and very uphill work she had found it. Once set going, a slander is like a stone that is dropped down from the top of a mountain—on it rolls from precipice to precipice, and there is no stopping it any more. Somebody had set this particular scandal rolling, and who that somebody was Edna had not the smallest trouble in divining, and the worst part of it was that the outlines of it, as it had been told, were true enough—for Miss Mathurin had in very deed been away from her home; it was only the inferences that had been deduced from the fact that were false, and that was exactly what it was so difficult to prove. No actual accusations reached the ears of the two ladies; nothing was said openly. Things that are said aloud are easier to grapple with—they can be in some degree denied or explained away, but for those stabs in the dark—hints, insinuations, meaning looks, and small intangible slights which tell which way the popular opinion is setting—for these there is no refutation, and nothing is to be done but to endure them in silence.

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"Sit tight and live it down," was Edna's advice to Marvie, and in spite of the girl's utter despair, of the passion of remorse which rendered her really ill, she would not allow her to lose heart or to knock under. Nevertheless she protected her to the best of her ability.

A great many visitors came to Western Lodge in those days—many more, in fact, than was at all customary—and young Mrs. Mathurin received them all most graciously and politely. She walked them round the garden, descanting on the famous roses, which she gathered for them in handfuls, and she offered them cuttings and roots out of the perennial borders, and she sent for Jacky and made great capital out of his baby words and ways, and then she gave them tea and cakes, and iced coffee and peaches, but she never by any chance allowed them to see Marvie, although, of course, she knew perfectly well that it was only to see Marvie and to find out what they could about her that they had come at all.

She grew so clever at parrying their questions that she came to be quite amused at herself.

"Miss Mathurin is not at home?" they would ask.

"Oh, yes, she is, but she is not very well to-day."

"Ah!" significantly. "I suppose she must have gone through a great deal?"

"I beg your pardon?—down Snap; please don't let him trample on your pretty dress, Mrs. Lane; fox terriers are quite irrepressible, and I

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am afraid his paws are dusty. You were saying——?”

“I was only saying you must be feeling anxious about Miss Mathurin.”

“About Marvie?—oh, dear, no, not in the least—there is nothing to be anxious about. She caught a chill when we were up in London together.”

“Ah—you were together, then, in London?”

“Yes, for a few days, and it was during that wet weather, and Marvie got rather a nasty chill; those chills are so horrid, you know!—but she is much better now, only not quite up to seeing visitors.”

“I am glad to hear you say you were *with* Miss Mathurin, for, really, I had heard *quite* a different story!”

“Indeed?” quite airily. “But one should never believe half the gossip one hears, Mrs. Lane—people are so fond of discussing things they know nothing about.”

One day it was: “I have called, Mrs. Mathurin, to ask whether you will suggest to Miss Mathurin that she should take her name off the tennis club.”

“Really! but *why*?” and Edna, hoping for a direct attack, opened her eyes widely and dangerously; but this particular lady was cowardly, and took refuge behind generalities.

“Well, you see, it’s rather awkward for me as the secretary of the club, and people are beginning to say there are too many members, and so I

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thought, as Miss Mathurin does not very often come to the meetings—and some of the ladies object——”

“Object to what? Pray go on, Mrs. Graves—to what do these ladies object?”

“Oh, to such a number of members who never attend the meetings, I mean, that is all; and I thought perhaps, if Miss Mathurin would not mind——”

“I will tell Miss Mathurin what you say, but as she has paid her subscription for the current year—I suppose she has done so?”

“Oh, certainly, certainly!”

“Well, I am quite certain, then, that she won’t dream of taking her name off the club; though I don’t suppose, after this incivility, that she will desire to renew her subscription next year.”

“Oh, I do hope you are not offended, dear Mrs. Mathurin?”

“Not in the least.”

“Of course, every one will always be so delighted to see *you*.”

“Thanks, but I never go anywhere without my stepdaughter. Will you have some tea?—do you take sugar?”

And when the much-abashed secretary of the tennis club got up to take her departure shortly after, she said again, quite tremblingly: “I do hope you are not offended by what I have said, dear Mrs. Mathurin; of course, I have to do my duty, and it’s very difficult to please everybody; and there have been so many disagreeable things

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said and such disputes at the committee meetings."

"I really do not desire to enter into the disputes of the tennis club," was Edna's quiet rejoinder, "nor do the disagreeable things said at the committee meetings interest me at all." Upon which Mrs Graves fled.

But there was a weekly ordeal which Edna would not permit Marvie to shirk, much as she desired to do so. To church on Sunday mornings she insisted that they should go together, and Marvie was decked in her smartest dress and newest hat and made to put bunches of roses in the front of her gown, in order to give to the black dresses of her mourning garb, for her grandmother, as festive an appearance as possible. It has never, indeed been altogether proved that on the first occasion of her appearance in the family pew at Western Parish Church Edna did not compel her stepdaughter to redden her pale cheeks with some extraneous substance, which, as neither of them possessed a pot of rouge, might possibly have been the crushed petals of the scarlet geraniums, which are known to have been used at a pinch in order to produce the desired effect. Whether that be so or no, at any rate Miss Mathurin was to be seen standing bravely up by her stepmother's side, looking very handsome and with a lovely color in her cheeks. But there came humiliations. The village neighbors, who had stared at her through the psalms and hymns, hurried away out of the porch, so as not to encounter her as they left the church. The

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doctor's wife turned her back perceptibly on the ladies from the Lodge; the rector's daughters ran on to speak to somebody in front; the very organist and his family drew themselves up and passed by with pursed lips and averted eyes; all these, the 'small fry' of the parish, avoided her, only the poor made no difference, for they all idolized Edna for her goodness to them, and they were quite sure there could be no harm in Miss Marvel for her to be such friends with her. And Edna pressed the girl's arm within her own as they walked down the churchyard together.

"Never mind," she whispered, "we won't let them trouble us, dear girl. We were right to go, and we will go again. Who are all these people, after all, who are so ready to believe uncharitable things about one they have known from her childhood? It's a capital thing, I think, to be suddenly under a cloud, or to lose money, or, in some way, to have gone down in the world, for that teaches one, better than anything else, how to discriminate between true friends and false ones. All the false ones fall away when one is in trouble—and they are not worth keeping, in my opinion."

When the news came of Sir William Wishaw's sudden death, Marvie was dreadfully upset. She had been very fond of her old cousin, who had always been kind and friendly to her, and her grief at the news of his death, and her sympathy for Sophy's bereavement, was so great, that she was for starting off at once for Fairfield Hall, in order to see and condole with her.

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But here Mrs. Mathurin put her foot down with the utmost firmness, and Marvie discovered, if she had not found it out already, how very firm this little woman's foot could be.

"You shall *not* go, Marvie. I will not have it!"

"But, Edna, think of her sorrow; and Sophy was at one time my greatest friend."

"She is no friend of yours now, believe me; I consider, in fact, that she is your enemy; it is to the malice of her tongue that I attribute all these abominable slanders about you."

Marvie after a few moments of thoughtful silence, said: "What makes you think that?"

"Because she was the only person who could have known that you had left home in the way you did. As I told you, I had to go there first to inquire before I could take any other action in looking for you, and I have no doubt whatever that she put two and two together."

"But why should she wish to do me harm?"

"Cannot you guess? Do you not see that she knew Claude Trafford long before you did, and that intimately. Is not a woman invariably jealous if another woman takes away her plaything from her?"

"But he was nothing to her—absolutely nothing; he told me so most positively; and, with all her faults, Sophy was not bad; and he was a friend to them both, to poor Bill as well as to Sophy."

"He was, at any rate, a pleasant plaything to

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Sir William's wife, and Lady Wishaw is not the woman to give up her toys to somebody else with a good grace."

"Still, *now*—surely now—when her husband is just dead, poor Sophy cannot even remember her foolish flirtations any more, I am sure, save possibly to regret them. Oh, yes, I know, of course, that she had flirtations, and that Claude was one of her favorites, but the death of her husband must, I think, have obliterated all such trivialities. Let me go to her, Edna, or, at least, let me write?"

"You may write, by all means, and if she writes back nicely, then you shall go—not otherwise."

Marvie bowed to that ultimatum and wrote to Lady Wishaw.

With the impulsiveness of a very genuine nature, she poured out her heart in the fulness of loving sympathy to her friend.

"Dear Sophy," she wrote, "do not let any small misunderstandings or mistakes come between us now. Let us forget the little trifles that perhaps have cooled us to one another, and in this great common sorrow, for the loss of the dear fellow who was so much to us both, let us be again the good friends and affectionate cousins we have been for so many years past. Write and tell me that I may come and see you and tell you how sorry I am for you in this crushing grief." And there was a good deal more of it in the same strain. The letter was posted, and Marvie waited with feverish impatience for the answer to it. Looking back upon all the years of their friend-

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ship, she could not believe that Sophy had really turned against her. She might have said an ill-natured word or two ; she might even have fancied that she owed her a grudge on the subject of Claude Trafford's attentions, but Marvie could not believe that in the face of the great sorrow of widowhood which she had undergone, and after reading her loving words of affection, Sophy could continue to harbor malice and ill-feeling against her. So, if she waited impatiently for the reply, she was not at any rate doubtful as to its purport.

Edna, on the other hand, never had a moment of doubt on the subject, although even she had not quite fathomed the depths of Lady Wishaw's vindictiveness.

This was Sophy's letter, which reached Marvie five days after she had posted her own :

“DEAR MARVIE,—I was rather surprised to hear from you, as, under the circumstances, I should have thought it would have been better taste on your part to wait till people took notice of you. I am much obliged to you for your kind sympathy with me in my sad bereavement, but, very certainly, I must decline to receive a visit from you. In my lonely position I cannot be too careful as to who I associate with ; a widow must be even more circumspect than a wife—this, I am sure you will admit ; and now that you have so utterly thrown away your own reputation, I do not feel that in justice to myself

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I ought to count you any longer amongst my friends. I am sorry to appear unkind, but you have only yourself to thank ; there are certain social laws which cannot be set aside with impunity, and when a girl forgets her own self-respect by eloping with a married man, she cannot be surprised if decent people refuse to have anything to do with her. Pray believe that I am really very sorry for you, and the best advice I can give you is to go right away—abroad—somewhere where you are not known, and could have a chance of beginning afresh ; there is really nothing else left for you to do.

“ Yours, SOPHY WISHAW.”

Marvie took to her bed for twenty-four hours after reading this effusion, and refused to be comforted. It was the downfall of her last illusion, and the burden of life appeared to her to be too hard to be endured. She turned her face to the wall and wished that she might die.

But there was Edna to be reckoned with. Edna gave her time, indeed, but Edna had no intention of permitting her to knock under. She put on a certain harshness of manner, rallied her on her lack of pluck, and finally almost dragged her out of bed.

“ Let me do as she advises ; let me go right away and become forgotten,” she pleaded.

“ Nonsense, you have got to stop and brazen it out.”

“ But, you see what she says—that he was a

married man? she believes that—because she told me herself that he was married, and that made me give him quite up for a time, till at last he confessed to me that his wife was just dead. If I had not believed that, do you suppose I would ever have consented to go with him?"

"He certainly told a great many bewildering lies. Apparently no two people ever were favored with the same version of his matrimonial affairs. However, the truth is out at last—the wife has been dead two years, and I am going to let Lady Wishaw know this myself."

"She won't believe you; she has told other people, I suppose, and, if they believe you, they will only say, 'if he *could* marry her, then why didn't he?' That is unanswerable, you know. You had better help me to go away, Edna, before my father comes back. When he hears what I have done, he will turn me out of doors."

"Not he, not if I know it, my dear. Show a little pluck, Marvie; set your teeth and defy all such little curs and beasts as Sophy Wishaw. Now will you get up and dress?"

"Yes, Edna. Oh, what *should* I do without you?"

And that was the one bright spot for Edna in the whole miserable business—Marvie clung to her desperately and with her whole heart. Nothing, Edna felt, could ever estrange them from each other any more.

Her patience and her courage, her passionate devotion to her husband's daughter had, at last,

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won their reward, and had overcome the mountain of prejudice and aversion which had once risen like a wall between them. Edna had won her victory; but there was yet another and a greater victory which she was now bent upon securing—she meant to save Marvie from the consequences of her own great folly, and to make of her, once more, a happy and light-hearted woman, who could look the world in the face fearlessly and without shame.

It would be difficult, perhaps, but young Mrs. Mathurin felt in herself the power to achieve the task.

As a preliminary step, she wrote to Lady Wishaw.

“DEAR LADY WISHAW,—I wish to make no comments on your letter to Marvie. I hope you are ashamed of it yourself by now. I simply write to correct an error you have fallen into. Mr. Claude Trafford is a widower; his wife died two years ago. She is buried in Trafford Dale churchyard, and I have seen her tomb. He asked my stepdaughter to be his wife, and it was in order to be married to him privately, according to his wish, that she left home. Fortunately, before the ceremony could be gone through she was made aware of circumstances so much to Mr. Trafford’s discredit that she broke off the engagement and returned home with me. I am in a position to know a great many facts connected with Mr. Trafford, having been acquainted with

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him all my life. My father was for twenty-five years vicar of Trafford Dale.

"Yrs., E. MATHURIN."

Sophy Wishaw emitted a low whistle through her pursed-up lips as she read the last words.

"The parson's daughter, by all that's holy!" she ejaculated. "What a coincidence!" and she felt that she was at liberty to hate young Mrs. Mathurin just a little bit more than usual for this discovery. For she had always fancied that Claude had rather a warm corner left at the bottom of his heart for that "parson's daughter" of other days.

To learn that his wife was dead was news indeed, and a distinct satisfaction to her. She remembered her own large fortune and chuckled.

"I shall turn the tables on them all yet, I believe," she said to herself with glee.

Yet it was after receiving Mrs. Mathurin's letter that she went up to town and met Ray in the under-ground railway.

Now that Marvie was down, she was quite determined to go on trampling upon her.

For Lady Wishaw had no mercy upon anyone who had thwarted her, and she was actually proud of the fact that she never forgot or forgave an injury.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE THORNS OF THE ROSE.

"TELL me the man's name, without further delay, Edna, for the long and the short of the matter is, that he must be made to marry her!"

For a few paces they walked in silence under the scented shade of the limes in blossom that bordered the road, he, boiling with indignant purpose—a knight burning to break a lance and cast himself into the thick of the fray for the honor of his divinity; she, not in the least surprised at his virile ebullition, but wondering silently at the crude and unsubtle methods of men, and not a little secretly amused by the panacea set forth so boldly for dealing with the difficulty.

It was, perhaps, scarcely surprising that Ray lashed himself into genuine anger with her, more by reason of the small short laugh which preceded her utterance than by the words in which she made reply.

"My dear Ray! what a rash decree; and how about yourself?"

"Myself! Good God, Edna, what do you think of me; what have I got to do with her any

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more, save to stand by her as a brother and see that justice is done to her."

Young Mrs. Mathurin turned on him sharply. "You mean that she has so far forfeited your love and respect as to be no longer the object of your desire?"

He winced a little at that.

"No—no—of course not that!" he answered, hurriedly. "Marvie can never be anything less to me than she has always been; but I do not intend to speak of that, because it is past. Marvie loves another man—I have recognized that fact, and, however unworthy he may be, he holds her heart. To give her her heart's desire is now all I can do for her; the fellow has played with her, jeopardized her good name, sent her back, probably heart-broken, to her home; well, he is not going to be allowed to do these things with impunity."

"Who is to prevent him?"

"I am. That is all I have come for—to get the man's name out of you, and to go straight to him and force him to do our dear girl justice. Don't you suppose my uncle would do it if he were at home?"

"Possibly he might. You men are all so dreadfully inconsequent!"

He turned on her wrathfully. "Can you not be serious? Even in so serious an affair as this?—surely you must agree with me that it is the only thing to be done. However bad a man may be, there are considerations by which he can be

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made to do right—the worst of us is not insensible to public opinion, to the obloquy of his fellows, or to the shame of the public dishonor, and although the fellow must assuredly be cruel and unprincipled, self-interest, if nothing better can at least be made to move him.”

And then Edna burst forth. “And so it is to this wicked and unprincipled man, whose only redeeming point is an egotistic regard for himself, that you would ruthlessly hand over our Marvie, for life—mind you, for life!—to suffer till the day of her death from the most hideous calamity a woman can be called upon to endure—a bad husband!”

“But if she loves him, Edna?”

“You think her love will make him less bad?”

“I believe that good women have been frequently known to convert bad men into good ones,” he observed a little doubtfully.

“Fiddlesticks! Out of what copy-book did you get that, Ray? And in this case, take my word for it, not all the goodness of all the good women who ever lived would alter one iota of the man in question. If *you* wish to condemn her to life-long misery, I do not. Moreover, I will not be a party to it.”

For a moment or two he was silent. Her arguments were certainly staggering, yet he was not altogether convinced by them. It did not seem to him that two wrongs can make a right.

Then Edna spoke again.

“In all this, my dear fellow, you are leaving

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out one rather important factor in the case—Marvie herself!”

“What do you mean?”

“Only that you have taken it for granted that Marvie would be glad to marry this man—whereas, as a matter of fact, if it came to the point, I happen to know that she would flatly refuse to do so.”

He stood still and faced her with undisguised amazement.

“But—if she loves him?” he gasped.

“But if she doesn’t!” retorted Edna.

“Oh, but if it is true that she went away with him, she *must* love him! How else can such an action as that be accounted for?”

“Well, I confess that it is rather difficult to explain, but, all the same, I am quite convinced that Marvie doesn’t love him.”

“Then her love must have died from ill-usage; she loved him at one time, apparently?”

“Or thought she did! You have used the right word, *apparently*. My own opinion is that what she felt for him was not love at all, it was infatuation, which is a very different matter!”

“You women are utterly incomprehensible!” ejaculated Ray, after a pause.

“I dare say; but you don’t know the man; I do.”

“You know him?” he cried, in astonishment

“Intimately, I may say!”

“Good God!—then you are perhaps standing up for him!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ray!”

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"But you said 'intimately'!"

"Because I have known him all my life."

"Have you? Then what is this precious scoundrel like?"

"The precious scoundrel is one of the most fascinating and delightful persons that it is possible to imagine."

"Oh—oh!"

"Which does not in the least prevent his being, at the same time, unprincipled, untruthful, and immoral; and all that with the manners of a Prince of the Blood, the voice of an Archangel, and the sweet persuasiveness of the Devil arrayed in the garments of the Lamb! What wonder was it that Marvie, who is altogether human and feminine, should have fallen a victim to the wiles of this unique individual! He could do what he liked with her, and coax her into anything, and the only wonder of the whole affair has been that she mercifully woke up very soon from her infatuation, so that I was able to bring her away with me without so much as a show of resistance on her part. By the time I appeared on the scene, Marvie had already found him out."

"It is true, then, that she went away with him and stayed in his house?"

"Unfortunately, yes, for he led her to believe he meant to marry her, and that a secret marriage was a necessity. But the truth is not in him, and, as a matter of fact, marriage was the last item of his programme which it suited his convenience to carry out."

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Ray drew a long breath.

"My God! and if you had only let me alone, I might have saved her from the depths of this humiliation! but you always held me back."

"And I was quite right to hold you back. What would have been the use of your speaking to her of your own feelings at a time when her whole mind was filled with the image of another man? Even before I knew, I guessed that she was in love; but you, you blind fool of a lover, never had the remotest suspicion of what was really the matter with her. I only held you back from rushing on your fate. However, it does not matter—it is too late now!"

"Too late! Why do you say that?"

"Did you not say yourself, only a moment ago that you had no ambitions now save to stand by her like a brother? This, no doubt, has been the frame of mind aroused in you by Lady Wishaw's veracious revelations. Of course, I can't blame you, for no doubt poor Marvie has done much to give color to the worst accusations which her slanderers have brought against her, and a man of blameless life, like yourself, must no doubt keep up the high standard of perfection in women by a stern attitude of resentment towards their shortcomings. Yet surely it is not so long ago since I heard you say that you would be capable of forgiving her anything and everything? But there, I know words sometimes run away with the best of us."

She broke off the sentence to glance at him.

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There was a brief pause ; for a few moments they walked in silence side by side.

She could see that he was deeply moved, and she was glad, because she had intended to move him. When suddenly he turned and faced her, there was something indescribably appealing in the clear and honest blue eyes ; and then, instead of arguments and explanations, he said, very humbly, what touched her profoundly :

“ Will you allow me to see her ? ”

She felt so utterly happy that she smiled broadly at him.

“ What now ?—to-day ? Why, she has gone to church. I had to tell a dozen fibs to get her to go alone ! ”

“ Church does not last all day.”

“ She has no idea that you are here.”

“ Would it not be wise to enlighten her ? ”

With a laugh she faced about, and they walked straight across the paddock to the garden gate.

“ I warn you,” she said once by the way, “ that if you are so foolish as to make love to her now, she will not listen to you ! ”

“ I am prepared for that,” replied the young man rather grimly. “ Marvie has never listened to me yet ! ”

“ That is because, as I say, you have always been too precipitate. You have never been clever enough to choose the right moment with her. You never give her time to recover one emotion before thrusting another under her nose.”

"I will bear what you say in mind. But, oh, Edna! who do you suppose knows Marvie better than I do?"

Edna wisely forbore to dispute the point. When they reached the house, the churchgoer had not yet returned—the sermon had been a long one—and Marvie, being alone, had been tempted to linger behind till the congregation had dispersed. The ordeal of passing all those unfriendly fellow Christian faces without Edna's protecting presence was more than she could endure. She was the very last to leave the church, and she really felt grateful to the parish clerk for touching his forehead respectfully with his finger as he closed the porch door behind her. Marvie's pride was sadly shattered in these gloomy days, and she had grown to be thankful for the very smallest of mercies. The house door stood wide open, and there was no one in the hall. There seemed nobody about but the dogs, who came bouncing out from the kitchen departments, to which they were usually relegated in durance vile on Sunday mornings, and who wriggled and wttithed their sinuous bodies in ecstasy against her skirts, and thrust their soft moist noses joyfully into her caressing hands. Those who live in dogless homes do not know how great a pleasure can be derived from that delightful canine "welcome home," which is one of the most spontaneous tributes of affection that this world can give us. Dear dumb friends, who do so much to brighten and warm our lives, in return for the often scanty

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measure of our notice and kindness! Friends who never change to us, and never forget us; who are always glad to see us come, and sad to see us go—whose pure creed of love is only to be with their loved ones always, wherever they may go, in health or in sickness, in wealth or in poverty.

I have not met many human friends whose affection can be spoken of in the same breath as that of the dogs who have loved me.

When Marvie had sufficiently responded to the greetings bestowed so rapturously upon her—for she understood these humble friends, and knew that they like to be answered as much as their betters do—she peeped into the drawing-room, but it was empty; neither could she see Edna outside in the garden. It was presumably the hour at which Jacky was asleep, for there were no childish carollings from the upper story; and, as she slowly went up the broad oak staircase towards her own room, she wondered a little at the silence of the house. But for the pattering feet of the dogs by her side, it would have been still as a sleeping palace.

When she had laid aside her hat and gloves in her own bedroom, she walked across the passage to that other room which, for many long years, had been her grandmother's sanctum, and which now, since the old lady's death, had, by a natural evolution of things, come to be regarded as her own.

The moment she opened the door she per-

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ceived that the room was already tenanted. A pair of long gray trousered legs stuck inelegantly forth from the lower part of old Lady Lareston's favorite arm-chair, whilst the broad sheets of the *Sunday Times* occupied the upper portion thereof, to the concealment of all else.

But the newspaper was knocked into a heap with a sudden crash as the door opened, and Ray sprang to his feet.

They stood for a moment facing one another like combatants about to fight; and, indeed, the old fighting instincts were awake in both of them, for these two had quarrelled and disputed, and made it up again, every inch of the way, ever since their childhood, and the habits of a lifetime were not to be laid aside in a moment. Marvie was on the defensive at once. She said to herself:

"He is here, of course, to revile and abuse me for my wickedness."

And to himself Ray said:

"She thinks I have come to be down on her, and resents it before I have uttered a word!"

Aloud, each spoke as follows, with a fixed and forced politeness:

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Ray; I had really no idea that you were thinking of paying me a visit."

"Is there any reason, my dear, why I may not pay you a visit?"

Then Marvie's eyes glittered dangerously, and she began to lash out.

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"I imagine that you have come up-stairs into my private room in order to say something disagreeable to me?"

"On the contrary, I came here because it is the pleasantest room in the house, and the one that I am best accustomed to," he answered, sweetly.

"Won't you sit down?" she replied, in the same tone. "Did you come down from town this morning? Was not the journey rather hot and dusty? When are you returning to London?"

He answered the question categorically:

"No, I won't sit down; I prefer to stand. Yes, I came down from town, and it was hot and dusty in the train, and I am going back by the 2.40. Anything else?"

"You have seen Edna; and it is a plot between you! that is why she let me go to church alone!" she said, suspiciously and rather savagely.

"Yes, I have seen Edna."

"And she has told you—what?"

"She has told me nothing that I did not know already."

She flounced away from him to the window, and stood with her back to the room.

"Which means to say that you know—everything?" she burst forth, turning round on him with a sort of fury. "I can see it in your face that you think the worst of me. Well!—why don't you speak?—what have you got to say?—pour forth your vituperation, please; I am wait-

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ing to hear it. Begin at once, and let us get it over!"

"My poor Marvie!"

"And don't dare to pity me, please! Why am I 'poor,' pray? I have done nothing to justify any man's compassion; hit out from the shoulder like a man, if you can, so that I can strike back, but do not waste your pity where no pity is required."

"Oh, Marvie, you dear, sweet fool!" he said, tenderly; and at that her hands went up to her face, and her slim fingers hid the light of her flashing eyes from him, and he heard a low moaning sob, and next, to his infinite horror, two large crystal tears came trickling through the spaces between her fingers, and fell with a splash down upon the front of her dress.

"You are crying, Marvie! My God! You are crying!"

"It's—it's—only temper!" gasped Marvie, gulping down the sob. "You know, Ray, I *never* cry from anything else!" And then it was as though they were back all at once into the happy quarrelling days of their childhood, for, following the good old fashion of long ago, Ray drew the fingers down, and mopped the beautiful streaming eyes with his own pocket-handkerchief, so that they both laughed.

"You've been so badgered and bullied, Marvie, that's what it is!" he murmured.

"Ah, then you *do* know?"

He was silent.

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"Well—go on—why don't you vilify me?"

"I am going to."

"Begin then, begin! say your worst. I'm quite ready to hear it."

Then he took her two hands in his and said it.

"Marry me, Marvie!"

She flung his hands away wildly, as if they burnt her.

"Out of pity you say that—out of pity! Oh, how dare you—how dare you!" She darted to the door; in another second she would be gone.

He bounded after her.

"But listen to me—for God's sake, listen to me, Marvie. Why do you misjudge me always? why do you twist and distort my words; it's that cursed pride of yours stands between us; let us, at least, talk it over."

"Why should we talk?" she cried, with her head and eyes averted. "I don't want to talk to you any more—ever. Ah! it's my 'cursed pride,' is it? you *are* ungenerous, Ray; at such a time as this, when you must know, must guess——"

"What if you want to marry anybody, it is that other fellow? Is that what you mean?"

Marvie stamped her foot, so that all the little china ornaments on the mantle-shelf jingled and jumped.

"No—no—no!" she cried, furiously. "I wouldn't marry him, not if it was to save myself from being hung!" Whereat it is small blame to Ray that he grinned broadly.

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He did not grin long, for she saw his face, and, reading triumph in it, lashed out again at him.

“ Ah, you laugh ! what have you got to laugh at, pray ?—don’t you understand that I hate all men—*all* !—every man on the face of the earth—you included. Do you want an answer, Ray, to your beautiful, tactful, thoughtful, affectionate proposal of marriage ? Well, then, take your answer : I shall never marry anybody !—never—never—never—never ! so there ! ” And with that she flung herself out of the room, and banged the door noisily behind her.

And Ray went back to London by the 2.40 train, if not a better, at least a wiser, man.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BETTER THAN NOTHING.

WHEN Mrs. Mathurin had consoled Marvie's anxiety concerning Claude Trafford, by assuring her, in the words of the old adage, that "naught never comes to grief," she had come nearer to the truth than she had had any idea of herself.

Perhaps Trafford's skull was extra thick, or perhaps his splendid bodily health stood him in good stead; be that as it may, the accident, which might very easily have been, if not fatal, at least exceedingly severe, turned out in the end to be insignificant. A slight concussion of the brain, which confined him to bed and condemned him to absolute rest for a few days, was the extent of his injury.

Very soon after he recovered consciousness, Mrs. Tamthwaite, who was installed as sick nurse by his bedside, made a clean breast of it, not without fear and trembling, on the matter of the disappearance of her charge.

"She was locked in hard and fast, sir. I can't think now how she managed to get out, for the key was hanging up in its place in the kitchen when we come back, and as to the winders, with them thick iron bars, it's a moral impossibility

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she could have got out of them. But gone she was—clean. She must have gone sudden like, for she hasn't even took her clothes away—nothing but a bag as I can find missing. I do hope you won't blame *me*, sir," added Mrs. Tamthwaite, tearfully.

Trafford uttered no reproof, but he remained a little thoughtful.

"Are you certain," he asked, presently, "that no stranger came into your kitchen during the day? nobody paid you a visit, I suppose, and found out that I was away from home, and that there was a young lady up-stairs?"

After a moment Mrs. Tamthwaite's broad hand came down with a slap upon her ample knee.

"Why, to be sure! now you mention it, sir, of course! there was Miss Coulston, as came to see me in the morning."

Trafford raised himself half up on his pillow. "Miss *Coulston*—did you say?"

"Now, sir, do please to lie down and keep quiet; the doctor said as how you wasn't to move. Yes, that Miss Coulston as used to live here—the reverend Coulston's daughter, you know. Oh, I dessay you don't remember her, sir; it's some years now since she went away—after her father died."

"I remember her very well," said Trafford, as he fell back obediently on his pillows. "So *she* came, did she? and I suppose you and she had a good gossip, eh?"

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And then, after a minute or two, to the house-keeper's surprise, instead of scolding her, he laughed.

"Ah, now I understand," he said, "I might have guessed as much, and the figure in the road that flashed out in the glare of the lightning and set that poor brute rearing and kicking. Ah, d——n her; she has cost me the horse with her tricks. I'd have forgiven her better if it was only the woman."

And the death of the young horse was a far greater annoyance to him than the disappearance of Marvie.

He had had his try for Marvie—a good try, he reflected. He had been keen about her, rather keener than usual, he believed, for she was undeniably beautiful, and he had been distinctly in love with her. Moreover, she had rendered herself desirable in his eyes by the many difficulties that he had had to overcome. He believed, too, that he would have been successful in gaining her consent to his plans in the end had not Edna interfered—Edna, who knew so inconveniently much about his past, and whose will he had never been able to break. He had reckoned a good deal on Edna's dislike of her step-daughter—this ought to have ensured her neutrality. What bad luck that she should suddenly have been moved to take the girl's part. Well, a man has no chance against two women, he said to himself, philosophically, especially when one of them is such a woman as Edna Mathurin.

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"These little women are always the very devil," he reflected, as he turned on his pillows. "A man can get a run for his money with the tall ones; your stately Junos, with the aspect of queens, are apt to be wondrously weak, but your little wenches are made of wire and iron, and once they set their teeth, no man has a chance against them."

There was nothing to be done—the game was up; he was tied to his bed and could not follow her—the thing was hopeless. Marvie had chosen to escape from him—well, let her go, the little fool! He did not utter one word of reproach to his penitent housekeeper; he only desired her briefly to pack up all Miss Mathurin's belongings and send them off to her by the first opportunity, "and don't let me ever hear you mention her name again, please Mrs. Tamthwaite. I meant to marry that ungrateful girl and make her the happiest woman in the world."

"I am truly sorry, sir!"

"Oh, you needn't be sorry; it's a lucky escape for me, I consider," he answered, with affected carelessness. "I am not in the least sorry about *her*; all I am sorry about is that four-year-old; he was the likeliest-looking little horse I've had between the shafts for a long while. As to the women, they may all go to the devil!"

Nevertheless, when Trafford got well enough to sit up, his first action was to call for writing materials, and the only letter he wrote was to a woman.

"I ought to write to her, I suppose. Widows all play the same game of sorrowing inconsolables, *at first*. It don't last, of course, but it amuses them to imagine themselves objects of pity."

And he wrote a letter of condolence to Sophy, Lady Wishaw. He had seen Sir William's death in the paper. He wrote to her several times more—for Sophy wrote back to him and her letters always required answers. She reproached and reviled him at first for his faithlessness and his perfidy, but when he had apologized and explained, and thrown all the blame upon the girl who had "been such a fool as to throw herself at his head," and when he had made it quite clear to Sophy that it really wasn't his fault at all, and that he had very soon got sick of her, and had taken the first opportunity of sending her home; and when he had distinctly stated that surely *she*—Sophy Wishaw—of all women in the world must know whom he really cared for, etc., etc., then, of course, Lady Wishaw began to relent, and the correspondence grew by degrees less acrimonious on her side, and less apologetic on his, and became, on the whole, very much more interesting to them both.

Truth to say, Sophy had come by this time to the stage of wanting a fresh excitement. The battle royal over the will had, of course, been delightful, but it was soon over, and even the fruits of victory are apt to cloy after a time if there is no one with whom to share one's triumph. Then came the move into the new

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house, and that was most entertaining, as long as it lasted, but the arrangement of tables and chairs, and the hanging of pictures and china plates, become an exhaustive process after a time, especially if there is no friend at hand to admire and to help and to envy ; and Sophy often caught herself wishing for Marvie in those days—Marvie would have been useful to her, she had such good taste, such an eye for color, such a veritable genius for making a room look pretty and comfortable.

But then Marvie had behaved much too badly ever to be taken into favor again. She had committed what was, in Sophy Wishaw's estimation, the only unpardonable crime in the whole category of feminine iniquity—she had poached in her own preserves, and poached, too, with a very considerable amount of temporary success. Time, however, brings its own revenges, reflected Sophy, with philosophy and satisfaction. Girls only burn their fingers when they enter into the lists with married women.

Married women, as the saying is, "know how to take care of themselves," and from the vantage ground of this superior knowledge they are competent to extract out of life's furnaces the maximum of amusement at the minimum of personal risk. But girls can't afford to draw chestnuts out of the fire. Girls should only have one respectable object in their dealings with the male sex—marriage and decent settlements ; all else is worse than waste of time.

"I have nothing to blame myself for," Sophy said to herself. "I warned her from the first that he was not a marrying man, and that she had better let him alone. She has only herself to thank if she has come to grief. Claude is a delightful creature, but he hasn't a scrap of conventional morality about him, and whether his wife is dead, or whether she is alive—and really this point seems to be not at all satisfactorily cleared up—it would never, as I told her, make a scrap of difference to him. He has got his wife's money for his life, if he does not marry again, and I should like very much to see the woman who would tempt him to throw that away. After all, I understand the man, and such women as Marvie and her stepmother don't understand him. One has to take men at their own limitations in this world; it's no use expecting from them what they haven't got it in them to give.

Sophy had now dropped the note of reproach entirely out of her letters to the invalid at Trafford Tower. Her only anxiety, at present, was to resume her influence over him. Trafford was, perhaps, the one man on earth for whom this vain and foolish woman had ever had one spark of real feeling; at the same time, she was well aware that if he possessed a heart, she was absolutely powerless to touch it. He had always liked her for what advantages he had got out of her society—for her pleasant, well-ordered house, for Sir William's excellent pheasant shooting, for the

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agreeable people he met at Fairfield, and even for the high-class cooking and good wines with which she had regaled him. She was neither unconscious nor forgetful of all this. These things appealed to him strongly, because, although he was a rich man, he was singularly destitute of the home comforts which riches usually bring. His small house in Half-Moon Street and Trafford Tower were his only homes. The place in Shropshire had been only rented during his father's life, and he had never cared to take another. In London he dined usually at his club; at Trafford Tower he made the best of Mrs. Tamthwaite's culinary talents, which were not remarkable. He had a warm recollection of Lady Wishaw's *chef*, and was distinctly glad to learn that she had followed the fortunes of her widowed mistress.

"You had better come and eat a decent dinner or two with me when you are well enough to come south," she wrote. "I must see if I can get hold of some unobjectionable sheep-dog to come and do propriety, and then you can pay me a long visit, and Mrs. Craig shall feed you up."

His reply had been: "Why not dispense with the sheep-dog?"

Her answer: "Certainly not. One must think of *les convenances*. A widow is bound to be extra careful of her reputation."

He: "You make me laugh, my dear girl. What is the use of shutting the stable door after the horse is stolen?"

She: "I really don't understand you. But

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Mrs. Craig has got a new way of cooking sweet-breads she is dying to get your opinion about, so I have written off to an old governess of mine, and told her to come down next week. She is very poor and quite past work, so a small salary will be a temptation to her, and as she is quite deaf and nearly blind, I cannot imagine a more satisfactory chaperone. As soon as she is installed here, you must come."

But Claude Trafford did not come as soon as she hoped he would.

Something occurred of a totally unexpected nature which caused him to travel up to London in great haste and perturbation of mind a good twenty-four hours earlier than his doctor considered it prudent for him to leave his room, and the news of so dire a calamity then and there awaited him that for many days he had neither time nor inclination to write replies to Lady Wishaw's constant and persistent letters. Other and more important matters took up the whole of his thoughts. For he arrived in London to find himself a ruined man. The whole of his late wife's fortune had been invested in the well-known Crown and Colonies Bank, Limited, which, for many years, had been looked upon as being as safe as the Bank of England. The shares were fifty pounds—ten pounds paid. There was no supposition that the shareholders would ever be called upon to pay up the remainder. Just lately, however, rumors of difficulties had been in the air; had Trafford been in town, or had he even

been well enough to look into his correspondence, he might have been warned in time. But his letters had not, for some time back, been forwarded to him from Half-Moon Street, and the first intimation he received of breakers ahead was an urgent appeal from his wife's trustees to come to town at once. This letter had been lying for several days at his London house, and only reached him at last, in obedience to his orders, when he had written to his man to desire him to send on all letters that had come for him to Trafford Tower. By that time four precious days had been lost, and he arrived in London too late. There had been a run on the bank, and a call was now made on the shareholders for the remaining sum for which they were liable. The result to most of them was ruin, and Claude Trafford was amongst those who were hardest hit. The whole of his wife's fortune, for which he had sacrificed almost every good instinct of his nature, was completely engulfed. At first it looked as if he would be left absolutely penniless, for the house in Half-Moon Street had to be given up, and its contents, valuable furniture and pictures, old silver and china, and art gems of divers kinds which he had delighted to collect, all had to be sold for the benefit of the creditors.

In the end, however, owing to the exertions of his solicitor, a very able and energetic man, something was saved for him out of the general ruin.

It happened that, a few years back, an old aunt

of his mother's had died, leaving him a legacy of between six and seven thousand pounds. This money she—being an old lady of a cautious disposition—had tied up so carefully and elaborately that it was found to be impossible to get at the capital. By the exercise of much ingenuity and some wit, Mr. Close, the solicitor, managed to secure this small fortune to his client, and Trafford, who at the time had almost despised what he had looked upon as a beggarly windfall, was now thankful enough to fall back upon it. It would, at least, stand between him and starvation, and he supposed he would be able just to manage to live upon it. It would bring him in about two hundred and fifty pounds a year—a mere pittance, indeed, to a man of his expensive tastes and habits, yet better, very certainly, than absolutely nothing at all. He would not, at least, as he had feared at one time, be obliged to give up his club.

In the smoking-room of that club he sat nearly from morning till night during these first miserable days of his fallen fortunes, brooding gloomily over his troubles, and more utterly down on his luck than he had ever been in his life before. He did not seem to have any heart or energy left; he could make no plans for the future, nor take any interest in anything in existence. He lost his looks and his appetite, and was altogether in a wretched condition of collapse and despair. To a man of pleasure, to whom amusement has formed the sole end and occupation of life, the loss of

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money cuts away everything, and he asked himself bitterly what he was to do without everything that had hitherto filled up his days.

He could afford nothing. Hunting, shooting, fishing were lost to him; a town life of theatres and dinners and suppers, of society and of week-ends at smart country houses, was out of the question. Every tradesman with whom he had dealt knew of his downfall, and would refuse him credit; they had been already prompt in sending their accounts, and he knew nobody who would be in the least likely to lend him money. As to doing any work—that was not to be considered, for what work was he fit for at his age? and where was it to be obtained. He might, indeed, go out to the colonies—and at that thought he groaned aloud, for it was a return of the bugbear of his youth.

One afternoon, as he sat and bemoaned himself over his fate, he thrust his hands deep down into his pockets and drew out by chance a letter which he had received on the previous day, but which he had never taken the trouble to open.

It had been forwarded from Trafford Tower to him, and there had come three already in the same handwriting since he had been in town. The other three he had thrust into the fire unopened, not being in a mood to care about reading them.

This last one, however, he had absently thrust into his pocket. He opened it mechanically with

a groan of impatience. Women's letters were not likely to amuse him just now.

He began to read it listlessly, hardly taking in the sense of what he read. Yet after a while it began to arrest his attention. "I am really getting dreadfully anxious about you, Claude," she wrote. "Are you ill again? why do you not answer my letters? have you received them? I wrote three days ago for the third time begging you to come here. I have everything ready for you—the nicest bedroom in the house, a smoking-room all for yourself, a horse in the stables for you to ride. If you don't care to bring your own valet, I have a man-servant who can wait on you, and Mrs. Craig is just longing to cook her cunningest dishes for your delectation. There is some pheasant shooting to be let near the house, and I want to take it, so that you may have something to amuse you when October comes, but I want your advice about it before settling to take it. In short, my dear Claude, I want you to understand clearly that I have got plenty of money, and that my only desire in life at present is to spend it, so as to make you comfortable and happy at my house. The 'sheep-dog' is here, so send me a wire and come."

Trafford remained staring at this letter for some moments. A new thought came suddenly into his head.

"By George!" he said aloud—the club smoking-room being at the moment empty—"and why not? Sophy bores me to death, but she has got

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lots of money, and the poor little woman is certainly devoted to me. I might go farther and fare worse."

And then he went out straightway to the nearest post-office and despatched a telegram to Lady Wishaw.

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CHAPTER XXX.

THE DAWNING OF A NEW JOY.

EDNA was dreadfully angry with both of them.

She had made up her mind that Arthur Mathurin's return from America should be signalized by the public announcement of the cousins' engagement. It would be the news which it would please him best to hear, and she was determined to give him that pleasure.

But the days were slipping away one after the other, and the six weeks of his absence were all but over; and, good heavens!—what fools these two young people were!

The Sunday battle had put back the hands of the clock again.

Why had Ray flown in the the face of her advice?—why had he not put a restraint upon himself and waited?—and why had Marvie been so stupidly blind to her own best interests as to send him away? Edna could only relieve her feelings by scolding them both.

She wrote a very angry letter to poor Ray, who was as miserably remorseful as he could be already, and she rated Marvie soundly for her unkindness to him.

“Why on earth did you send him away?” she

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cried, despairingly. "Where could you find, in the whole world, a man who would make you a better, truer, more devoted husband than Ray would?"

"My dear Edna, I told him, what I now tell you, that I never mean to marry at all."

"Fiddlesticks!"

"I should have imagined that you would have seen for yourself," went on Marvie, with her head in the air, "that after what I have done, I am quite unfit to be any man's wife."

"That is only your pride, Marvie."

"Pride?—is it not rather my humility? Don't you see that I am 'a woman with a history,' as one is called if one has done something shocking. Do you suppose I could endure to be pointed at as the girl who ran away with somebody else before she married! Besides—I will not be married out of pity!" she added, with a little angry frowning of her brow.

"Ah—ha! did I not tell you, Marvie, that it was all pride?—now you have admitted it! *Pity*, indeed!—why, don't you know that Ray worships the very soles of your naughty little feet?"

"Well, he is a dreadful fool," she said, reflectively, after a brief silence.

"That I don't deny. He was a fool to speak so soon; he ought to have held his tongue, and gone away and said nothing; then your vanity would have been hurt, you would have felt annoyed, and have wished him back."

"You make me out a nice sort of creature!"

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"You *are* a nice sort of creature, my dear ; all the same, you are very femininely aggravating, and just now I have no patience with you, and, considering that you are really very much in love with Ray——"

"Oh—oh !"

"Deny it if you can ! You *are* in love with him ; you have been in love with him all your life."

"Why, we have done nothing but quarrel ever since we were babies !"

"That's just it. Women don't go on quarrelling about nothing with the same man, for years, unless they enjoy the process, and that is a form of love."

Marvie laughed a little, then suddenly she blushed—a deep, vivid blush, which swept over her face from brow to chin.

"Have you forgotten that little more than three weeks ago I was supposed to be in love with Claude Trafford ?"

"*Supposed* to be ! yes, you have described it exactly. It was supposition, and nothing more. The man infatuated you, just as years ago he infatuated me. It was an obsession, a midsummer madness ; but, Marvie, you *never* loved him with your best self ; at the very bottom of your heart Ray held his place. I don't believe there was ever a moment when the thought of Ray as all that is best in man, in contrast to all that is worst, ceased to be the underlying influence in your heart. You could never have been happy with a

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man like Trafford—your so-called love for him would have withered up very soon under the blighting atmosphere of his selfishness and shallowness, of his lack of truth and lack of heart. He would have tired of you in three months! I think from the first you have half known, half guessed, what he really is, and therefore, as I say, I do *not* believe that you ever really loved him with your heart and your better self."

"How well you read me, Edna!" she answered, with a short sigh. "I fancy you are right. I always mistrusted him, and his sudden passion for me alarmed me as much as it flattered me. His friendship with Sophy, too, was always a perplexity to me. I believe he traded upon her vanity and folly, and simply made use of her to suit his own convenience. I have never quite been able to make out why he suddenly appeared to transfer his attentions to me; there has always been a mystery about it. But you know, Edna, how charming he could be—how utterly fascinating."

"Yes—I know," she answered, slowly; and for some moments they paced the lawn in silence together.

Then suddenly Marvie stopped and faced her companion.

"Edna—did *you* love him?"

"Devotedly! I was very young, Marvie, and he was the first and only man who ever spoke to me of love. I loved him with all my heart and soul, at first."

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"And then you found him out?"

"And then he broke my heart!"

"But afterwards—later—you met father, and you fell in love with him, and he made up to you for all you had suffered, did he not?"

Once more there was silence for a brief space, and Edna's fingers closed with an almost convulsive grasp on the hand that lay within her arm.

Then, with far-away eyes she spoke.

"Arthur—your father—fell in love with me, Marvie; I was not in love with him. Hush—do not speak. Listen; I am going to tell you something I have never told to him, nor to any one on earth. I was very miserable; I was alone in the world; I had no home; I was amongst strangers in a far country. Your father offered me everything that a woman craves for most—affection, consideration, worldly ease. I felt that I should have been mad, indeed, to throw away such an offer, just because I was still eating my heart out for the memory of a man whose love had been an insult and a shame to me. Your father is too good and noble a man to have even understood such an infatuation; it would have shocked and revolted him; I could not bring myself to tell him my story. It was my own secret—I resolved to keep it. And I married him!"

"And you have never told him?"

"Never. Nor will I ever do so. There are some secrets, Marvie, that a woman had much better keep forever locked up in the deeps of

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her own heart; no good is done by telling them. I have only told mine to you, so that the knowledge of it may help you; but for this, my connection with Claude Trafford would have died with me. Yet I do not mind owning to you that, had I realized at the time what I should suffer through my silence, I would never have married Arthur."

"Why?"

"Because his love for me is so great and so deep, that had I for one moment understood its immensity, I would not have dared to have taken it all, and made him so poor a return. Oh!—do not mistake me, Marvie, I do not regret my marriage now, for now I love him. Love has come to me since he has been away—and the old idol, seen under the new and searching light of his infamous conduct to you, has crumbled away into powder. I see now, clearly, what I want you to see—that it is possible to every woman to fall down and worship false gods, to mistake evil for good, the untrue for the true, the vile and base metal for that which is pure gold. Many and many a woman has done this, Marvie, before us. It is a horrible mistake, no doubt, but there is no such great shame and disgrace about it, after all. The only pity of it is that we should allow it to spoil our after lives. For many years I have been foolish enough to permit the memory of Claude Trafford to spoil mine; but, if I can help it, he shall not spoil yours."

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"Sometimes I almost hate him now," murmured Marvie.

"I am glad of it. Only I want you not 'sometimes,' but at all times, to hate him really. I am angry with myself now, when I think for how long that man's image has stood between me and my happiness, and that for him I have been cold to the noblest of men and the best of husbands. I seem to have been as one that is blind; but now the scales have fallen from my eyes, and I see things as they really are. If it is any comfort to you, Marvie, to know it, I can assure you that your story has swept away my last illusions concerning Claude Trafford. I can never thank you enough for the service you have unconsciously rendered me. So now I want to be of use to you too. I want you to see in my story what I have seen in yours, so that we may be a mutual benefit to one another.

Marvie said next to nothing at the time, but for several days after this conversation she was very quiet and thoughtful. She was gracious and gentle, too, in her manner to Edna. There was a pretty deference in the little caressing ways she began to adopt towards her, and there is no doubt that Edna's frank confidence touched her very deeply. She recognized that Edna was, by nature, reserved and little given to self avowals, and she knew that she must have made a great effort in thus opening her heart to her. Moreover, they were fellow-sufferers—the same misfortune from the same source had befallen them both, and although

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Edna had met her evil days with more courage and more resolution than she had done, yet, in some ways she had suffered more deeply, and for a greater length of time, than she was at all likely to do; for Marvie knew that she had not loved the man as Edna must have done. Edna had been alone in the world when Trafford had failed her; there had not been a living soul on earth to whom she could turn for affection and support. Alone and friendless, she had gone out into the cold outer world, hiding the wounds of her bruised heart as best she could from the eyes of the strangers about her.

"I am more fortunate than she was," thought Marvie. "I have my home, my place in the world, where, if I am only patient, I can surely win back in time the good name I have so foolishly thrown away; I have also Edna's love and her example, and I have learnt to look upon her as the best and dearest of all friends—and, yes, I have something else too," and here a bright smile broke over her sad face, as a gleam of sunshine burst from behind a bank of clouds. "Yes—I have got Ray!" and for some inscrutable reason Marvie's eyes suddenly filled with a mist of tears—tears not at all of sorrow, but of grateful and timid joy.

The school of adversity had taught salutary lessons to Marvel Mathurin, such as nothing else could have brought home to this spoilt and headstrong child of fortune. She had seen for herself the precipice to the brink of which her wilful

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unreasonableness had brought her, and she had shrunk back shudderingly from the abyss into which she had well-nigh fallen.

And now her pride was humbled and her old arrogant spirit was subdued, so that all the sweet and hitherto unseen graces which Ray alone, perhaps, had known to exist in her now had room and place to grow and flourish in her heart. Her whole nature seemed to be expanded and softened by the bitter experiences she had undergone. Marvie felt that she could never be harsh and unjust and self-glorious any more.

"Who am I?" she said to herself in those days, "to judge and condemn others? when, but for Edna and God's mercy, I might have fallen past all hope."

And, although she told herself that she was certainly unworthy of Ray's love, she no longer felt so absolutely certain that she would forever remain obdurate to him.

So, as the days passed uneventfully away, young Mrs. Mathurin grew to be aware, by degrees, that the dearest wish of her heart was to be granted her. She had saved Marvie for Ray!

Meanwhile the great ship that was bearing home her husband to her was already throbbing her way across the Atlantic.

It was with a strange new excitement that Edna awaited Arthur Mathurin's return. There was something which had been missing out of her life ever since she had last seen his face.

At first she had scarcely noticed or been aware

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of this vague and intangible something, but by degrees the blank assumed a clearer and more definite shape, and the stormy and disturbing events that had taken place in his absence brought home to her, very accurately, exactly what it was that she missed and craved for.

It was Arthur Mathurin's great love which was wanting to her. That love which she had hitherto valued so little, and, at times, almost resented, now seemed to her, all at once, to be the most precious thing in the whole universe. She recalled his tenderness, his consideration, his un-failing thought for her welfare and her happiness, the warm answering affection that had enfolded her like a mantle in all her goings and doings, the constant longing for her presence, the softening eyes that followed her across the room, the firm clasp of the fond hand always outstretched to draw her to his side. Ah! how could she have been so blind and so besotted as to ignore and be callous to all this for the sake of that other whose heart was so false and fickle, and to whom 'love' was but another word for a cruel and discreditable egoism!

And so young Mrs. Mathurin, musing over all these things, fell in love for the second time in her life—and fell in love with her own husband!

Like a girl who nurses her first passion, she was filled with all kinds of fond and foolish forebodings. She studied the barometer, and the direction of the wind, and pored over the weather

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forecast in the newspapers. She had nightmares about storms at sea and shipwrecked mariners ; and all day long she seemed to see the rise and fall of the great ship's bows against the long rolling billows of the Atlantic.

Like a girl, too, she counted the hours and the days, and altered her mind a dozen times as to which would be the most becoming dress and hat to wear when the glad day came that she would go up to London to meet him on his return.

But often too—like a woman who has learnt and suffered in the school of sorrow—she told herself that it would only serve her right if some dire calamity intervened to take him forever from her. If he were to be drowned at sea ; if she herself were to sicken of a fever and die !—But, ah, no—God could not be so cruel !

It is only those who love who picture to themselves these extremities and agonies of unforeseen and improbable dangers, and Edna, grown wise at last, loved now with the love that cannot be at peace out of sight of the object of its devotion.

And the worst of it was, that Arthur Mathurin must never know of this new birth within her heart ; he must always, to the end of time, believe—that she had loved him like this from the first. To him everything must remain the same ; it was only to her that a new heaven and a new earth had opened ! And that was no doubt the punishment for her utter folly that was laid upon her. To cut away his happy delusions would be but a sorry manner of rewarding him for the years

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of his unrequited affection. It must be little by little, by slow and imperceptible degrees, that she must show him how infinitely dearer he had become to her now than in the early days of their marriage.

Jacky came in for a large share of his mother's confidences. She clung to him with fresh passion of adoration in these days of waiting; and even Marvie was not admitted to those delightful interviews, wherein the mother and the child, with a thousand crooning murmurs and caresses, conveyed to one another the delightful fact that he—the link and source of all love between them—was coming back to them both.

“You are mine, and you are his!” she cried to him, as she strained him passionately to her heart. And though, of course, Jacky did not understand her in the least, yet he fulfilled his part by laughing and shouting for joy upon her knee, in unconscious sympathy with her mood of love triumphant.

CHAPTER XXXI.

EDNA'S CODE.

"I AM going up to London on Wednesday in order to meet Arthur at Euston on Thursday morning. We shall be back in time for dinner at Western Lodge. Why don't you run down on Thursday by the 2.30 train, so as to be there to receive your uncle when I bring him home? Marvie will be alone all day, and I can't help thinking that she will be glad to see you this time—that is, if you play your cards carefully."

So wrote Edna to Ray as the happy day of Arthur Mathurin's return drew near. She had received a telegram from Queenstown that he was safe across the ocean, and she was secretly half beside herself with delight.

Nevertheless she did not forget Ray, and, being almost certain now that Marvie was more than half inclined to repeal her decision of perpetual celibacy, she came to the conclusion that it would be a safe move to summon him once more to Western Lodge.

But of this letter she said no word to Marvie.

But before she started for town on the eventful Wednesday, she and Marvie had a little con-

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versation together on another matter. Edna was going to town with her maid by a late afternoon train, and intended to spend the night at the Euston Hotel—so the two ladies were having tea together in the garden before she left.

“Your father will be delighted to find the roses are still in bloom,” remarked Edna, looking about her with delighted eyes; “he was so afraid he might be detained till the first blow was over! The Crimson Ramblers are done for, certainly, but there are plenty of others left, and that arch of *Rève d’or* is a picture.”

Then Marvie broke in irrelevantly.

“Edna, you know papa will have to be told——”

“Told what?—that the Crimson Ramblers couldn’t be persuaded to keep out?”

“Oh, bother the roses!—they are the nuisance of one’s life!”

“On the contrary, they constitute its chiefest joy. You are an unnatural child, Marvie; you haven’t inherited one atom of rose mania; why, even I, who knew nothing about them——”

“Are ready to make a fool of yourself over them so as to curry favor with your rose-mad husband!” laughed Marvie. “But do be serious, Edna; why do you evade my words—when—when you know that I am wretched.”

“If you are, it is your own fault.”

“Does that make things any better for me, do you suppose?” And she said it so sadly that Edna got up and kissed her. “You see,” said

Marvie, miserably, "that father will have to know."

"I see nothing of the sort. Who is to tell him, pray?"

"If you will not, I must. How could I be so despicable as to go on living under my father's roof with such a secret on my conscience?—it would be awful of me!"

"Sometimes," said young Mrs. Mathurin, after a brief pause, "you make me very angry indeed, my dear. You have made a very unreasonable statement, which is founded on a total misconception of the right proportion of things. I fail to see the awfulness of that which is unknown. It would be much more 'despicable' of you if you were to tell your father about that unlucky affair, because the knowledge would certainly make him very unhappy, and I do not choose that my husband should be rendered unhappy by information which can profit nobody on the face of the earth—neither him, nor you, nor me. Therefore, not only shall I certainly not tell him myself, but I utterly forbid you to do so. You people who pride yourselves upon your honesty and outspokenness strike me as being exceedingly selfish and self-centered—all you seem to think about is yourselves; how to make a clean breast of it, as you call it—that is, how to shove off the burden under which you suffer on to somebody else. Can there be any virtue in that, pray? When will you so-called 'honest' persons learn that there are many in-

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stances in life when to keep silent is a positive duty, and to speak an absolute crime? There is one person only who, perhaps, ought to be told, and that is the man who is to be your husband—but, as you say you are never going to marry——”

Marvie moved uneasily in her chair, and Edna threw a sidelong glance at her.

“We need not take that hypothetical personage into consideration, need we?” she concluded.

“You need not,” admitted Marvie, rather confusedly. “Leave him out of the reckoning; he—he—won’t come back.”

If she said it in the hopes of being contradicted, those hopes were crushed, for Mrs. Mathurin only smiled and said nothing.

“But I ask you, burst forth Marvie, anew, “how am I to keep it from papa’s knowledge, even if—if we both conspire to keep him in the dark? Will he not see how people turn their backs upon me? will he not notice that something is amiss?”

Edna shook her head. “Not he! he will notice nothing at all. Men never do, you know, unless their attention is forcibly called to a subject. If they see anything that they are not accustomed to see, it’s only by dint of shoving that thing under their very noses.”

“Are they so blind as all that?” said Marvie, musingly. “I should not have thought it.”

“No, because the only man you know anything about really—is, or, I should perhaps say, *was*—head over ears in love with you. When

they are in love they grow keen as ferrets, and often see much more than there is to see. It sharpens their wits to be in love. But your father is in love with *me*, allow me to remark. He is quite likely to notice that I have altered the way I do my back hair, but if the whole country were to cut you dead, I doubt if he would be aware of it. No, no, Marvie; if you want to give any news to your father, let it be news of a kind to give him not grief, but joy,—such as you might very easily give him, if you were not the most obstinate and pig-headed girl on the face of the earth,” she added, rather viciously.

Marvie bit her under lip and looked demurely down at her fingers.

“I think you misjudge me,” she said, quaintly and demurely. And then Edna was glad that she had written to Ray.

She set out on her journey with a light heart. If Ray came—she had had no answer to her letter, but the odds were in favor of his coming—and if he set about his task judiciously and carefully, and if he found Marvie in the right mood, and if they did not immediately fall tooth and nail upon one another about some entirely trivial matter, then, perhaps, things would go as she wished, and Arthur might have the supreme gratification of being met by the news of the engagement of the young people.

“But, dear, dear!” groaned Edna, “what a lot of ‘ifs’ there are to be complied with before

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one can feel any certainty whatever about the business."

Surely never since the world began did any young man and young woman, who were by all the laws of God and of man so eminently fitted to become man and wife, give so much unnecessary trouble and anxiety to everybody belonging to them.

Edna was convinced, notwithstanding intervening episodes of a damaging nature, that Marvie had never really cared for anybody else than for Ray, and, of course, poor Ray had never taken the trouble to conceal his passion from her discriminating eyes; and yet these two lovers, whenever they met, instead of making love, as all decent-minded lovers from the days of the creation till now have always done, could never be reckoned upon to do anything but fight.

"Once married, they'll make up for it," said Edna, shrewdly to herself. "Fighting is sometimes a very fine and firm foundation for love. I prophesy that those two will become the most absolutely spooney married couple to be found within the British Empire.

And then the ticket collector came to the window, and Edna forgot Ray and Marvie, and remembered only that this was London, and that in a few hours she would be waiting at another terminus to welcome back the husband whom she had parted with almost with relief, but to whose return she was now looking forward with a passionate expectancy.

Just as she drove out of Waterloo Station a hansom passed her with a portmanteau on the top of it. It was getting dark, and the street lamps were being lit, but as the hansom shot rapidly past her own four-wheel cab, a flash from the lamp fell swiftly across the faces of the occupants of the hansom.

There were two people inside it—and she knew them both.

Sophy, Lady Wishaw, conspicuous in her window's bonnet with its white edging against her fluffy hair, and Claude Trafford. They did not see young Mrs. Mathurin. They looked very happy, and were laughing and talking merrily together. It was evident that they were going down by the seven o'clock train. It was also evident that Lady Wishaw's recent bereavement did not press upon her spirits unduly.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LADY WISHAW'S NEWS.

ON the following day—Thursday—the day on which her father was expected home, Marvie Mathurin had her small stepbrother brought down-stairs to eat his dinner at her lunch hour.

Secretly, and almost by stealth, Marvie had begun to take a good deal of quiet notice of this young gentleman, and found him, as Ray had said that he was, a very jolly little kid. Since she had begun to love the mother, Marvie felt less inclined to dislike the child, and, indeed, there was nothing to dislike in him, for he was beautiful as an angel to look at, with his great eyes that were like Edna's and his tossing curls, and the red rosebud of his pouting lips. He was, moreover, a good-tempered and well-mannered child, full of high spirits, yet gentle and docile, and always obedient to the word of command. So the lunch passed off very well indeed, and Marvie was quite sorry when the nurse came in to fetch Jacky away for his afternoon walk.

After that, she cut up the dogs' dinners, and made them each go through their various tricks and performances before she put the plates down on the floor, and when she had duly watched over

them until each had eaten up the last morsel on his own plate, and had prowled round to the plates of the others to see if anything better belonging to other dogs was not to be picked up, then she turned them all out on to the lawn and strolled out after them herself.

She was in a queer, half-repentant mood ; she felt sorry, oddly sorry, not so much because she had made an egregious fool of herself as because she had thrown away so many days that might have been happy ones, but that she had spent in nursing up imaginary grievances, and fostering imaginary animosities. She knew that she had behaved very badly to everybody about her, but that the person who had suffered most from Marvie Mathurin's ill-conduct had been, undoubtedly, Marvie Mathurin herself. Now she admitted, with an odd sense of humility that was quite new to her, that she had been wrong all along the line. Her father had been quite in his rights to marry again, where, when, and whom he pleased—and she knew now that he had in very truth made a most wise and excellent choice. Ray had seen this from the first—but then Ray was so good !—and Marvie sighed. Ray had never visited his disappointments by unkindness towards a charming little child who had never done him any conscious harm, although, if Ray had hated Jack, it would not have been very surprising.

But Ray was too good to hate anybody.

“He can't even hate me,” sighed Marvie “although it's really a great pity that he does not.”

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Then she paced once more up and down under the Pergola of roses, thinking—

“Oh, how I wish,” she cried, suddenly, aloud, “how much I wish that I could do something to show them all how sorry I am, and how gladly I would make up to them for all the trouble and worry I have given them.”

And she walked across the lawn towards the open drawing-room window.

She knew very well what she might do if she chose.

Without waiting to go up-stairs, she sat down at the writing table that stood in one of the drawing-room windows, dipped her pen in the ink and began to write rapidly.

“DEAR RAY,—If you think me worth it, come back and ask me to marry you once more, and I will give you a different answer. I don’t think I have ever really loved anybody but you. The other was only madness ; and if you can forgive my bad conduct and trust me once more—” So far ; then a dead stop, with pen poised in the air ; then suddenly the paper flew into a dozen atoms, and the fragments were flung with vicious vigor down into the depths of the waste-paper basket under the table.

“Forgive me ! trust me ! come back, please, and be so kind as to marry me ! Not if I know it. I can’t have fallen so low as all that !”

Then after a few minutes more she took out a fresh sheet of paper, dipped her pen once more in the ink, and began again in another strain.

"Of course, my dear Ray, I know you are entirely my superior in all the cardinal virtues, and, no doubt, I ought to consider myself highly honored and flattered by your condescending preference for my unworthy self; at the same time, you must really be aware that I am not going to knock under to you. I never have done so yet, and I'm certainly not going to begin. I'm not ashamed of anything I have done, and if you choose to insult me—" And then Marvie flung down the pen and burst out laughing.

"Oh, dear, what a fool I am!" she cried aloud. "As if any man alive would come back to a woman who sent him such a letter as that. Oh, I am afraid I can never compose the right kind of letter for Ray—regretful, but not humble; penitent, but not groveling; self-respecting, but not self-assertive. I am afraid I can never write it. This will have to be torn up too," and she began slowly to suit the action to the word, "for the fact of the matter is, that though I have pluck enough to run away with a blackguard, I haven't got wit enough to throw myself at a good man's head, even though he happens to be my first cousin and my own familiar foe."

So the second letter went the way of the first.

She was just in the act of rising from the writing table, when the door of the room behind her opened, and before she had time so much as to turn round, the footman suddenly announced—

"Lady Wishaw."

The servant closed the door behind himself,

and Sophy advanced into the middle of the room.

Marvie uttered a quick "Oh!" of indignant amazement, and back against the writing table with her hands behind her.

Sophy came forward smiling, with outstretched hand. She was in widow's mourning, of course, but somehow there was an undefinable lightening and brightening of the conventional somber attire. The heavy and ugly *crépe* was replaced by tulle and gauze; the bonnet or *toque* was a butterfly affair that was extremely becoming, and gave no indication of inconsolable grief, and a large bunch of *stephanotis* and *maidenhair fern* fastened into the bosom of her dress filled the atmosphere with fragrance, and gave almost a bride-like touch to her whole appearance.

Marvie, gazing at her sternly and disapprovingly, disregarded her outstretched hand, and it dropped limply down at her side.

"Really, Marvie—aren't we going to be friends?"

"I thought you were afraid that I should be detrimental to your reputation. You said so, if you will remember, in your answer to my letter."

"My dear girl, I assure you I only said I thought I ought to be careful just at first, owing to my lonely position. That was said at a time when I was surrounded by my enemies—all poor Bill's nasty people, you know. But now things have changed a good deal, and I have so much to tell you, Marvie, dear. I am so delighted to

find you alone, so that I can have a real good talk with you. Don't you think we might as well sit down, even if you won't shake hands with me?"

"You can sit down if you like," replied Marvie uncompromisingly; "I prefer to stand."

Lady Wishaw selected for herself a comfortable arm-chair, and sat down in it with her back to the windows. Marvie so far relented that she moved from the writing table and walked across to the empty fireplace, where she stood leaning back against the mantelpiece, so that she faced both her unwelcome guest and the windows.

"I have a great piece of news to tell you," proceeded Lady Wishaw, with a brilliant smile and Marvie could not help noticing how exceedingly well and altogether radiant she looked.

"I am all attention," she said.

"I am going to be married again," said Lady Wishaw, still smiling seraphically.

Then Marvie was fairly startled at last.

"*Married!* you—you? Why, dear old Bill hasn't been dead two months! You can't mean it, Sophy! Why, it's horrible, unnatural, what you say! I don't believe it; it's some abominable joke—and a truly disgusting joke, too; it's impossible!"

Lady Wishaw laughed, one of her own little dangerous laughs—soft and sweet and vicious withal, and her eyes narrowed themselves evilly in a manner which Marvie remembered of old.

"It is not a joke in the least, nor is it impos-

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sible. You can call it 'abominable and disgusting' if you like, although you, of all people, my dear Marvie, ought not to condemn actions which are, at least, perfectly within the bounds of morality. I don't want to be down on you, my dear, for, of course, I know you were foolish and imprudent more than actually wicked, still I think you might have a little toleration for other people. Besides, I am not going to do anything to shock good old British susceptibilities. I am engaged, certainly, but I am not going to be married for another month—and then not in England, but abroad. I am going to travel, and shall meet my future husband in August at Vienna, where we shall be married quietly and then remain abroad for the winter. I have had a very rough time of it ; to be the wife of an old man is a great trial to a young woman, and though I did my duty by poor Sir William most thoroughly, I can't pretend that there was much pleasure or happiness about my marriage to him."

Marvie remained stolidly silent. She was shocked and indignant, and distressed beyond measure, at the slights which Sophy flung at the memory of her kind and devoted old husband. If she spoke, she felt she might probably say too much, so she preferred to say nothing.

But her silence aggravated Sophy more than words would have done ; she was dangerous before, she grew diabolical now.

"You have not asked the name of my future husband, Marvie."

"I don't think I want to know it," answered the girl, scornfully.

"Ah—but I want you to know it; besides, you will be very much interested, I am sure."

Then Marvie knew who it was.

"I am going to marry a friend of yours, Marvie, a friend who certainly did not treat *you* very well—poor fellow, he is to be pitied rather than blamed, for, of course, as long as poor Bill lived his passion for *me* was hopeless. He always adored me, but honor sealed his lips and he could not say a word. Naturally, being driven mad with misery about me, he rushed into follies and excesses, as men always do, you know; poor things, they can't help it, they are made like that—if they can't get the woman they want, they go running after women they don't care a hang for."

"And I am one of Mr. Trafford's 'follies and excesses,' I suppose, you mean?"

"Exactly. Of course, it was very naughty of him, and he has been *well* scolded, as you may imagine, but I have forgiven him now, dear fellow, for he was so penitent, and came rushing down to see me as soon as ever I could in decency agree to see him, and, of course, laid his heart and his hand at once at my feet."

"And his wife's fortune?"

"Oh, of course that is sacrificed, he loses every penny of it. What won't a man in love do, my dear? Luckily I have something of my own; for there is nothing they won't fling to the winds for the sake of the one woman they worship—as

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you will find out yourself, perhaps, some day, Marvie dear, if any man ever falls in love with you."

Marvie laughed a little. "Oh, that is surely too improbable an event, isn't it?" she said, sarcastically.

"Oh, no; why do you say that? I don't at all see why—when all this story about you has blown over, that is to say—you will live it down some day if you are careful, and people will get some fresh little scandal to talk about soon, and then they will forget yours."

"Thank you," said Marvie, fervently; and at that moment a shadow darkened the open window, and Ray appeared in the sunshine outside.

He stopped short in amazement just as he was stepping into the room—caught Marvie's eye and a quick little gesture of her finger whereby she enjoined silence upon him. Lady Wishaw went on talking unconsciously—her back was turned to him—and the apology for a widow's bonnet nodded up and down as she spoke.

"You will have to be very careful, of course; any little future lapses, you know, would be fatal, my dear girl; the world sometimes forgives once, but never twice; and you will have to be exceedingly circumspect if you want to get a husband. I should never tell him, of course; if he ever finds out anything you must deny it stoutly——"

And then Ray slipped noiselessly and cautiously in through the embrasure of the window.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SILENCE GIVES CONSENT.

"You see," continued Lady Wishaw, blandly, "girls who throw discretion to the winds very often get left in the lurch."

The listener by the window curtains looked as if he was going to leap forwards to annihilate the speaker, but then again that restraining finger kept him motionless; he drew back, but the blue eyes flashed fire. Ray, indeed, looked positively murderous.

Marvie began to enjoy herself very much indeed.

"You think, then, I haven't much chance of getting a husband?" she inquired with a show of anxiety.

"I should be sorry to say that, Marvie; as I said before, I don't want to be down on you now you are in a tight corner, but you must know, as well as I do, that men do not marry girls who are the heroines of doubtful histories. After a time, no doubt, if you are careful and live it down, you may very likely find some man who might marry you. Of course you can't afford to be particular, you know, so I advise you to jump

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at the very first man who shows the slightest inclination to make you an offer of marriage."

"Well, I suppose I am not particular then," replied Marvie, "for that's exactly what I have done. And here he is behind you."

Lady Wishaw sprang to her feet, and Marvie walked across to the window and passed her hand under Ray's arm, and the two stood facing her. Both were rather red in the face, but both were smiling.

"Oh!" gasped Sophy. "Do you mean to say that you are going to marry your cousin? Is this a joke, pray?"

"Not in the least. I *am* going to marry him."

"And Mr. Mathurin is willing to marry you—*now*, after the dreadful history he has been told about you?"

"Certainly, Lady Wishaw—even after the dreadful, and mainly untrue, story I have been told about her," replied the young man, significantly. "I am not only willing, indeed, but most eager to marry my cousin, now—this very minute."

"Our marriage will be solemnized this day month," interpolated Marvie, with becoming gravity.

"What! the very wedding day is fixed? Why on earth didn't you say so before, then? instead of allowing me to go on talking."

"I thought it seemed to amuse you to go on talking."

Lady Wishaw began arranging her veil before

the glass, patting down the curls of her fringe with little impatient dabs. The short laugh with which she turned round again towards the cousins was somewhat artificial, and had a hysterical note in it.

"Well, I suppose, then, there is nothing left for me, then, but to wish you happiness."

"Certainly, Lady Wishaw," said Ray, with a bow.

"Then we shall be brides together," she murmured, purringly, to Marvie. "Married the same month! I am so certain to be myself the happiest woman in the world, that I can hardly expect anybody else to experience the same perfect bliss as mine. At the same time, I do most earnestly hope that this fresh beginning may turn out more satisfactorily for you, dear; and as for *you*, Mr. Mathurin, I can only say I wish you joy of your bargain."

And with a mocking bow, and not altogether without the honors of war, Sophy, Lady Wishaw, whisked herself out of the room.

Left alone together, Marvie and Ray stood a little apart. There was a brief silence, just until the sound of the wheels upon the gravel outside told them of the final rout of the enemy. Then their eyes met—Marvie's were shy and embarrassed, Ray's eager and rapturous.

"Was it a joke, Marvie?"

"Not unless you like."

"You meant it, then?"

"I meant it—then."

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"Do you mean it *now*?"

"If—if you like."

"Oh, my darling, my love, my sweet one!"

"Don't, Ray—I—I can't breathe," gasped Marvie, out of the depths of that crushing rejoinder. "You are pulling all my hair down. Of course, I make allowances for you, for as it is not leap year, there was I suppose nothing to prepare you for it, so it's natural you should be excited, but you—really—oh—*don't*!"

But her gasping words were stifled with quick kisses, whilst all Ray managed to utter in excuse was, "I won't leave you any breath to quarrel with me this journey."

When a few minutes later they found themselves seated rather more sanely upon the same sofa, Ray's mind had time to revert to the departed visitor.

"Did that little cat really say she was going to be married again in a month?"

"So she says."

"Great Scott, how disgraceful! what a perfect little devil she is! Who is the unfortunate and much-to-be-pitied man?"

For half a minute Marvie hesitated. She was thinking about a certain recent conversation with Edna—to tell secrets which can only render the people you love unhappy is rank selfishness, Edna had said. And then and there Marvie determined never to relieve her own mind at the expense of Ray's peace, or to identify Sophy's new husband with the hero of her own unfortunate

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escapade. Ray knew quite enough about it—for his own happiness he should never, she told herself, know any more.

"She is going to marry a Mr. Claude Trafford," she replied, after that brief pause, with the utmost tranquillity.

"Poor beggar!" said Ray. "To repeat that sweet creature's parting words to me—I wish him joy of his bargain."

Then he went back to the far more engrossing occupation of informing Marvie, in every known word of the English language, how very superior she was from all points of view to any other woman whom God Almighty had ever created, or was ever likely to create until the end of Time.

When Arthur Mathurin and his wife drove up to the door of Western Lodge three hours later, Ray and Marvie were standing together in the porch to welcome them. Something in their attitude and aspect made Edna cast a quick glance from one to the other, and in a moment she perceived that it was all right.

As soon as Arthur Mathurin was inside the house and had kissed his daughter, he, too, became aware of a new adjustment of circumstances.

"You two young people look very full of beans," he remarked, looking from one to the other with an inquiry in his dancing eyes.

"We are, papa," replied Marvie, demurely. "We have just settled to spend the rest of our natural lives together."

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"That is, if you will consent to it, my dear uncle."

"Upon my word, that is capital news, the best in the world. Edna, you did not prepare me for this?"

"It was somebody else's secret, Arthur," with a glance at Marvie. "I—wasn't sure if I ought to tell you."

A few minutes later, when the kisses and congratulations were over, and after Arthur who was tanned by the sea voyage and much rejuvenated by his trip, and altogether looking younger and handsomer than ever, had fled up the staircase two steps at a time to go to his little son's nursery, Edna turned to the cousins.

"How many hours have you been engaged, pray?"

"Three and a quarter, ma'am," replied Ray, promptly.

"And how many quarrels have you had already?"

"Three, and a fourth is brewing," answered Marvie.

"You are both perfectly incorrigible," cried Edna, laughing. "I suppose you will go on fighting forever."

"It's so lovely making up again, you see," said Ray, deprecatingly.

"Oh, go and dress for dinner, you mere male," she retorted, pushing him playfully towards the staircase. "And you, Marvie, come into my room, I want to speak to you."

And no sooner were they alone than she proceeded to cross-question her.

"You have accepted him at last, then?"

"No, he accepted me."

"What *do* you mean?"

"Why, I said I was going to marry him, and he said nothing. Silence gives consent, you know—so that settled it. Don't look so scared, Edna; don't you see that it was quite the best thing I could do. If I had left it to Ray to propose again, he would have done it so badly that I should have been certain to refuse him; and so, you see," she added, demurely, "I really thought if we were to get on at all I had better take the matter into my own hands."

"You are wonderful, Marvie. I don't now quite understand how the thing came off," and Edna looked bewildered.

"You poor darling. You are quite mystified. Well, that isn't quite everything, you know. I have something else to tell you." And then she went on to tell Edna of Lady Wishaw's visit, and of how Ray came in just as Sophy was telling her she had a very poor chance of ever getting a husband.

"It was irresistible, you see," said Marvie, laughing.

"You are a naughty child," replied Edna, "and you don't deserve the very splendid piece of good fortune that has befallen you."

"I know I don't," said Marvie, quite gravely and humbly, and rather to Edna's surprise she saw that the girl's eyes had filled with tears.

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"After all," she said to herself, "Ray is right—below all the brass and the rubbish there is a solid substratum of purest gold in Marvie."

But when Edna heard that Lady Wishaw was going to be married again, and to Claude Trafford, she literally danced round the room in fiendish glee. She clapped her hands and shouted aloud with joy. "I knew she would! I knew she would!" she cried. And then she proceeded to explain how she had heard, when she was in London, that Trafford had lost all his wife's fortune in the crash of the Crown and Colonies Bank. "From the moment I heard it, I was convinced that he would fall back on Sophy Wishaw. It was a thousand pounds to a penny piece on it. But, oh, how cordially they will soon hate each other; in three months' time they will be barely on speaking terms."

"You say it as if you were delighted, you inhuman creature."

"And so I am; what does a woman deserve who talks about marriage before her first husband has been dead three months. She has had a good one once, and now she will get a rank bad one, and I hope she will enjoy the change; but, after all, it serves her jolly well right."

Then after a little pause, she said with sudden gravity:

"Marvie, did you tell him?"

"Tell Ray?"

"Yes, that Claude Trafford was the man?"

"No, I didn't."

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"You never will—will you?"

"No, I never will."

"Good child. Now go and dress, and we will wipe that man's name out of both our lives—now and forevermore. Do you agree?"

"Yes," said Marvie, "I agree."

And then, just as she was leaving the room, she turned back and caught hold of Edna's hands.

"Oh!" she cried, impetuously, "it's all your doing, Edna; but for you, everything would have gone wrong with us all. You are the very best woman on earth, I believe—and what a lucky man my father is! Thank God—thank God! that he married you."

THE END.

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